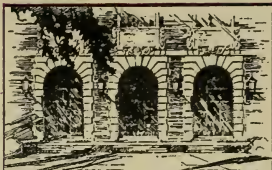


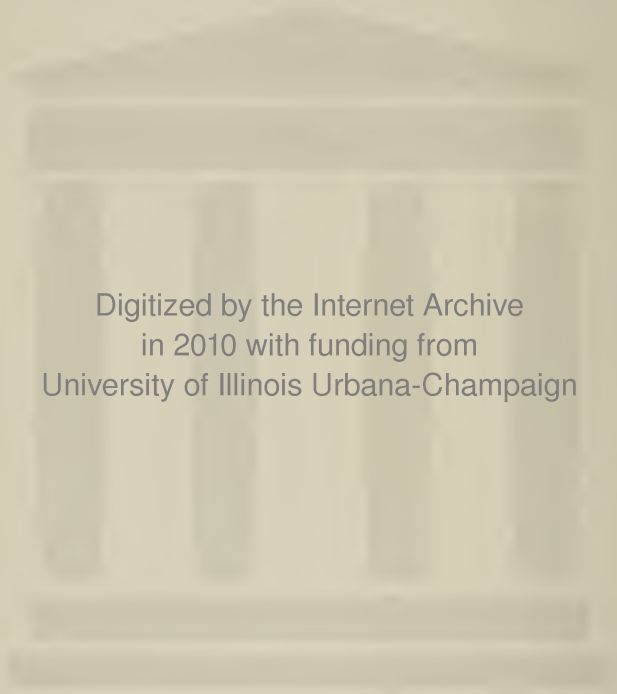
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THE PHANTOM FUTURE

VOL. II.

THE
PHANTOM FUTURE

BY
HENRY SETON MERRIMAN

AUTHOR OF "YOUNG MISTLEY"



IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. II.

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THE PHANTOM FUTURE.

CHAPTER I.

FORTUNE SMILES.

A FEW mornings later, Crozier was placidly disposing of a very fair breakfast with the help of a newspaper propped up against the coffee-pot, when Tom Valliant appeared. The medical student placed his hat gravely upon the head of a bronze statuette which stood upon the mantelpiece, and then sat down on a chair which he brought to the table.

“Good morning, Samuel,” he said. Then he raised the covers of one or two dishes with quaint anxiety. “The cupboard is bare,” he remarked, regretfully.

"Yes; I have cleared things off a little; but of course you have had your breakfast."

"That is so," answered Valliant, as he drew the coffee-pot towards him; "but nevertheless . . ."—he raised the lid and sniffed the steam that rose—"I will drink your second cup for you, just to demonstrate that our diplomatic relationship is perfectly friendly."

"Will you have it in an egg-cup or the slop-basin?" asked Crozier, gravely.

"Slop-basin, please. Holds more," replied Valliant. He was searching busily in the breast-pocket of his coat, and presently he produced a card.

"Mrs. Abergeldie Gibb," he read aloud, with much unction, "at home Tuesday, February the twenty-first, from eight to twelve. Dancing. R. S. V. P. Samuel Crozier, Esquire."

He laid the card aside, made a little bow, accompanied by a courteous gesture of the hand, and added in a congratulatory tone—

"*There* you are, my boy! What do you think of that."

Crozier took up the card, and examined it

critically, while his companion stirred his coffee with a table-spoon.

“Are you going?” he asked.

“That,” answered Valliant, “is precisely what I don’t know. There are many questions in that one—wheels within wheels, as it were; notes of interrogation inside notes of interrogation, till the perspective is lost in a haze. Sugar, please! First of all, are *you* going? Secondly, is it worth the long journey? Thirdly, think of the dissipation of the thing. Eight to twelve; twelve o’clock! Midnight! Can we stand it. Are our constitutions equal to it? Toast, please!”

“Mine is. Have some butter!”

Crozier rose from his seat and consulted a small diary which lay upon the writing-table. As he turned the pages he happened to glance round, and found Valliant’s eyes fixed upon him with a certain questioning eagerness. There was no trace of a smile upon his face now.

“Yes,” the singer continued, after a short search, “I am free on Tuesday the twenty-first. I vote we go. What do you say?”

“Oh yes,” answered Tom, carelessly, while he

buttered a piece of toast. "Oh yes, we may as well go. I don't think I should have gone alone. I am not such an enthusiastic dancer as you, but as you are free, let us go by all means."

Crozier closed the book and returned to his seat. He looked indifferent, and somewhat dense; not at all the sort of person to be reflecting that Tom Valliant sometimes overacted his part—a little.

"By the way," he said, with sudden energy, "I have some startling news—so startling that I could hardly eat any breakfast."

Tom Valliant again looked under the covers with some anxiety, and a weight of significance.

"Let us have it," he remarked pleasantly. "I am strong—tell me everything."

The singer selected a blue envelope from among his letters, which lay, methodically folded and replaced within their covers, upon the breakfast-table.

"I have had a singularly friendly letter," he said, sarcastically, "from a firm of solicitors whose name I have never heard of, to tell me

that my mother's brother has been removed—no—I beg your pardon, has passed away. They call him my dear uncle, but I have always understood that he was rather a disagreeable old gentleman. However, I am of a different opinion now—this letter has opened my eyes to his true worth. He has not only left me a quantity of family plate, but certain moneys duly invested as per schedule, yielding an annual income of . . . where is it? . . . of two thousand one hundred and seven pounds, ten shillings and fourpence.”

Valliant whistled softly.

“What an uncle,” he murmured sadly; “what an uncle for a fellow to have! Shake hands, Sam, shake hands! It shall never be said that Thomas Valliant forsook an old friend because he was in altered circumstances—never!”

The singer shook hands gravely, and returned to the perusal of the blue letter.

“One sugar-basin,” he read aloud, “one cream-jug, twelve large forks, twelve small forks, six table-spoons, twelve tea-spoons, and a soup-ladle.”

Valliant nodded his head at each item, as if

to impress them upon his memory, and when his companion folded the letter with an air of extreme satisfaction, which was very cynical and somewhat ungrateful, he looked grave.

“Well then,” he said, “you are lost. The coming season will see you drawn into a vortex of well-dressed vice and fashionable wickedness—*vide* lady-novelists who write from the seclusion of Camberwell, where they study their subject over a penny Society paper. Scheming mothers will quarrel over you, and in the privacy of the ladies’ cloak-room will say to their daughters, ‘Now if that man Samuel Crozier is here—the man with the fuzzy moustache and the baritone voice—*fix* him. I know for certain that he has, besides what he makes by singing, two thousand one hundred and seven pounds, ten shillings and fourpence; twelve sugar-basins, six cream-jugs, and a soup-ladle.’”

“But how do you know?” asked the singer, with a smile, “that scheming mothers have not known my brilliant prospects all along? How do you know that I have not been ‘fixed,’ as you gracefully put it, hundreds of times?”

Tom looked across the table at him with momentary gravity.

"Then it is not a surprise?" he asked.

"Not quite," was the answer; "I always knew there was a chance of it."

"What a funny fellow you are!" observed Valliant musingly, after a short pause, during which he had lighted his pipe. "And you never told me—I might have borrowed no end of money from you. If it were not that I am myself rolling in the golden rewards of honest toil, I should feel inclined to do so now."

"It is very good of you to say so," replied Crozier, pleasantly, as he turned over the proof pages of a new song which an enterprising publisher proposed (upon a financial basis) that he should sing in public, and allow the fact to be mentioned on the cover. After studying the score for some minutes he rose and tried the air over with the piano, singing in an undertone while Valliant smoked and watched him.

"I suppose," said the latter shortly, "that you will give up this sort of thing?"

Crozier swung round on the music-stool.

“What!—singing? Not I. Nothing will make me give that up.”

“Well then,” urged Valliant, earnestly, “you will have to take a house, and marry one of those eager-looking musical eccentricities who always wear spectacles and a pencil, go to oratorios and heavy concerts with a bundle of musical scores under their arms, and—if report be true—never fail to turn up when Samuel Crozier is going to sing.”

The object of this graceful flattery ignored the pleasing suggestion. He had turned his back upon his companion, and was playing the air of his new song, softly.

“No,” he said, “I thought of buying a yacht—a yawl, I think. I might take the family plate to sea and throw it overboard in a gale of wind by way of lightening the vessel and removing the responsibility of that soup-ladle from my bachelor shoulders.”

“There is something in that,” rejoined Valliant gravely. “Honestly speaking, Sam, I don’t like that family plate—it is not natural, and it will inevitably lead you into ill-considered matrimony.

In my vivid imagination I see you already whispering into the ear of some fair and well-seasoned enslaver: 'If the devotion of a life-time, in addition to one cream-jug, one sugar-basin, twelve large forks and twelve small dittoes, can do aught towards a woman's happiness—Araminta, they are yours; and there is also a soup-ladle!' The soup-ladle would probably settle the matter."

"I think I would sooner sink the plate in the yawl," said Crozier, with that pleasant smile of his, which somehow never waxed into a laugh.

Had Syra, or some other comparatively speaking (for most of us look inwards instead of abroad) observant person been in the room then, or indeed at any other time when these two men were together, it is possible that she would have felt a peculiar tension in the atmosphere. Old friends as they were, devoted friends and upright men, their position towards each other was not honest. They were not at their ease, and each showed it unconsciously in the way and manner that belonged to his character. Tom Valliant with a gaiety and lightness of heart

which were the outcome more of habit than of nature. At times it was utterly false, devoid of humour, and to an acute listener terribly sad. Nature had in her bounty given him a light heart and a cheery courage—which is human sunshine; but one felt that this everlasting “badinage,” this subtle fear of gravity, had some meaning, and the meaning could only be that Fate had chosen to spoil Nature’s good work. The light heart was fighting beneath an overwhelming weight.

And Crozier! The singer was never intended for a humorist. He was formed of good and solid material such as can be shaped into a brave man, intellectual enough for most purposes, genial enough to become a favourite and a true friend, and strong, self-reliant, purposeful, sufficiently to win the love of a good woman, and never let her regret her choice during all her life. His quizzical cynicism, which had no real bitterness in it, was the fruit of circumstances; under it he hid such softer qualities and virtues as are best concealed from a preying and covetous world.

It was therefore somewhat pathetic to see him (labouring under the disadvantage of his greater thoughtfulness) endeavour to keep pace with his friend's lighter vein.

As a rule they were excellent companions. They had many topics in common, many mutual interests, and all could be discussed openly and freely, with one exception. The mention of Goldheath brought about that strange tension which was felt by both, though each concealed the feeling as well as lay in his power. There are some things, I am convinced, which are better left unexplained. We talk of the ravelled web of human life which is one day to be disentangled, we whisper of mysteries which will be cleared up in the Hereafter; but for my own part, I sincerely hope that everything will not be touched upon in that great clearing up of human mistakes, the final explanation of things that are dark and meaningless to us now. I hope that many sleeping dogs will be allowed to lie. There are a thousand unexplained things in every life which, although they may never be forgotten and may influence the entire existence

of several persons, are better left untouched. Among these there is of course a large majority which might very easily, and some people think, very profitably, be explained now—from lip to ear, or with pen and paper; but such frankness, such honesty, and such idiotic plain-spokenness would only serve to make our threescore years and ten a greater muddle than they already are.

Reticence is not usually classed among the standard virtues. It occupies a somewhat distressing position midway between them and the rabble of minor vices. With an adjective before it in praise or blame, it can be made to serve as either, but the position is ever a false one. It ought originally to have been elected boldly to the higher place, and much doubtfulness of mind would have been spared us, while a clearer line might have been drawn between connivance at a mistake and unvarnished falsehood.

Perhaps reticence has never had its due recognition, because in many instances it is a mere habit, with all a habit's power of growing and increasing until it is nature. Samuel Crozier was by nature a reticent man; with Tom Valliant

the quality was a habit acquired from association with one whom he admired and respected as he admired and respected no other human being upon earth.

They both felt this dull embarrassment, which was hardly visible, but existed nevertheless at the mere mention of Goldheath. The feeling was less intense, perhaps, with Crozier than with Valliant, because the sailor possessed a greater power of self-control, and there is no doubt that the exercise of this power over any particular emotion or sense is liable in time to deprive that sense of existence; but his observation was keener, and Valliant's least glance or movement was rarely lost. Thus they had gone on for years, without ever approaching nearer to an explanation, and now it was too late. The habit had grown too strong, the silence too sacred. But, despite what may be said about frankness and plain-speaking, I maintain that they were better thus. It was one of those instances where the explanation had better never be given, for is not a friendship with but one flaw in it superior to one that is broken up? Had either of them

spoken with a view of dispelling the cloud that rose at times, things never would have been the same again.

Of most things they talked freely enough, and Valliant was frequently confidential respecting his own affairs; but Goldheath and the doings there never came under discussion. When they left its broad, hospitable door the subject was by tacit understanding shelved. Men have this way of doing things more frequently than women. Some there are who go through life without ever discussing an unsettled point even with father, brother, or dearest friend, and the question is never answered with earthly lips, never seen with earthly understanding. Crozier never thanked Valliant effusively for procuring him directly or indirectly an invitation to Goldheath at a time when acceptance was permitted by his engagements, and Tom expected no such thanks.

It would have been natural when travelling together from or to Goldheath to speak of past or anticipated pleasures there, but no such words fell from either of them. There were plenty of other subjects possessing mutual interest, and on

these they conversed with that peculiar tension of which I have spoken until their minds were fully occupied by other thoughts, and Goldheath was laid aside or forgotten.

As Valliant rose to go when Mrs. Sanders had with miraculous rapidity cleared away the breakfast things, a few words were spoken with reference to Mrs. Gibb's invitation, which they arranged to accept separately, while Tom wrote to Mrs. Valliant, intimating that they would take advantage of her hospitality expressed in a letter received by him.

"Of course we will go to Goldheath to dine and sleep?" said Valliant, interrogatively, as he drew on his gloves carefully.

Crozier was standing before the fire smoking a wooden pipe, while his hands were thrust into his pockets.

"Yes," he said briefly. "Is it necessary for me to write, or will you accept for both?"

"I will write—that will be enough."

Valliant moved slowly across the room towards the door. Crozier continued smoking and staring into the fire.

"G' morning, Sam," said the medical student.

Crozier turned and looked over his shoulder, but Valliant was already out of the room, and the door was slowly swinging to on its ancient and noiseless hinges.

"Good morning," he called out.

Then he walked to the window and stood looking out. Valliant crossed Lime Court without glancing back, and passed through the narrow doorway leading westward towards the Strand.

"I thought," muttered the singer, without taking the pipe from his lips, "in fact I *knew* that there was something from . . . Goldheath as soon as he came in!"





CHAPTER II.

A SHADOW FORECAST.

SYRA had in no way exaggerated matters when she told Crozier, in her abrupt, neat manner, that the world was pleased to consider that his influence over Tom Valliant was not exactly beneficial. But she had put rather a different emphasis upon the words, and so altered the meaning into a decided expression of condemnation.

It was not considered in Syra's world a very disgraceful proceeding to go to the bad. So many had done it, and having reached that mystic bourne appeared sufficiently well-to-do and quite happy, that there was almost a sense of merit in it. Vice most certainly has a subtle fascination for women and very young men. All Saint Antony's students admired, in a way, the

out-at-elbows scamps who frequented Myra's whenever they possessed the price of a beverage; and therefore, when it had been said that Tom Valliant was going to the "dogs," and that Sam Crozier was in no way attempting to stop his career, there was no virtuous ring of horror in the remark.

"Sam—dear old Sam," was different from other men. He could do things which other men could not do—associate with questionable characters without any one thinking the worse of him—frequent questionable places without being noticed there. Outward influence never moved him. But Valliant was different. Unconsciously prominent, he did not possess the happy faculty of passing anywhere unnoticed. His escapades were talked of, his name freely passed from lip to lip, while no one took the trouble to inquire whether Crozier had been there or not.

When Tom Valliant first came to Saint Antony's it was distinctly and openly under the wing of Samuel Crozier, who was known to many of the students, notably to Wilson Leonard and other older men, who were studying a special

subject without attending every lecture. Crozier and Valliant had been seen together at all times and in all places, with the usual result of associating their names together in men's minds. Where Crozier was, Valliant might be expected to come, and *vice versâ*. But this had not lasted long before the singer deliberately adopted another course. He saw that Valliant's daily existence was in many details a very different life from that of a professional singer. The hours of sleeping and waking were for the student different from his own. While his own days were leisurely if not exactly idle, Tom's were busy, and the night was required for rest. However he looked at it, from whatever side he asked the question in his own mind, Crozier recognized the fact that too close a friendship with himself was not conducive to the ultimate benefit of the young fellow tacitly considered to be under his protection.

He therefore drew back imperceptibly, accepted engagements to sing in provincial towns, and eschewed the society of Saint Antony's men. In a word, he withdrew his influence, from a

modest assumption that it was likely to do more harm than good. But the old association of the two names held good, and casual observers saw no difference.

About this time a great change came over Tom Valliant, who was now in his second term. He suddenly became a leader instead of being led; and moreover, he who had been rather quiet and thoughtful, was the first among the noisier and gayer of Saint Antony's students.

Crozier noticed this, and concluded that it was the natural result of association with men of lighter stamp and a more congenial age than himself. But among these new companions there were some whom the singer did not like—such men as Walter Varden—and when it was too late he endeavoured to regain his influence over Valliant. However, as previously stated, Valliant had in the meantime changed, and the attempt failed signally.

Thus Samuel Crozier found himself in the painful position of being morally responsible in the eyes of the world for the misdoings of a man over whom he could not attempt to exercise

influence without incurring the risk of losing his friendship. However, the singer did not attach much importance to the world's opinion, and being himself content that Valliant was not going to the bad, and never would, he merely watched matters from a distance, without interfering or thrusting himself forward in any way, when he had once discovered that his influence was powerless.

He saw and knew the better side of his friend's life, while to Syra the worst only was presented, and it was therefore only natural that she should treat the matter more seriously and upbraid the patient singer for his apparent indifference, which she did freely and sincerely whenever she had the opportunity. Indeed this was the only subject which was discussed by them with gravity.

Syra's exhortations did not, however, lead him to deviate from the course he had laid out for himself, much as he respected her judgment and appreciated her sincerity.

These two may at times have failed to understand each other, but there was on the other hand a singular lack of *misunderstanding*. Both

recognized the presence in the other of some few thoughts and a stray motive or two which were hidden from all; and these, both in turn respected. Neither attempted to fathom the other; there was too much mutual respect for that, absurd as it may seem to you, madam, to apply such a word to a barmaid. Thus Crozier never quite understood Syra's interest in Tom Valliant; that it was sincere he never doubted, and that it was without afterthought he was convinced. Beyond that he knew nothing.

The girl's words were not entirely lost upon him when she told him that his own name was coupled with Valliant's in a manner likely to come to the ears of his family, with the usual kindly additions of such imaginations as it might touch in passing from mouth to mouth. He had told Elma that his influence over Tom was for no good, but she had chosen to disbelieve him. If, now, the same opinion came to her from another quarter she might be shaken in her disbelief, and this scepticism had been very pleasant to the singer.

One evening, a few days after Syra had spoken,

Crozier conceived the idea that he had neglected Tom Valliant of late. That strange mutual embarrassment which arose whenever the topic uppermost in both their minds was broached, had not of late decreased, and this perhaps led to a slight mutual avoidance. In fact, the friends were drifting away from each other, as men do when a woman's shadow comes between. There was nothing definite, nothing tangible beyond that vague embarrassment, and instead of lessening their mutual affection it added to it. It was not indifference that caused them to drift apart, but increased affection and the shadowy forecast of an unavoidable sorrow.

With these indefinite thoughts struggling for mastery in a mind which would not allow itself to think, Samuel Crozier pushed his way through the crowd that surrounded the stage-door of a great concert-hall, and bent his steps towards Myra's. The evening had been a brilliant one, and his clear steady voice had as usual proved true to his desire, and quite indefatigable. This was no mean point in his singing, that his mellow voice was utterly reliable. He never seemed to

take a note that caused him the least exertion, and he never made a mistake. The rich harmony vibrated from his lips over the heads of the audience with a wonderful fluency and ease, while to him it was a pleasure in which no tricks of art could be detected.

As a rule he went straight home when his work was done, or at the most called in at a club. Of late he rarely went to Myra's, where his absence was scarcely commented upon. Successful men were in the habit of dropping their acquaintance with the little meeting-place, which was, as Tom Valliant once remarked, essentially a *dépôt* for "returned-empties"; and it was only natural that Sam Crozier should follow the universal custom.

To-night he was going to Myra's, and he knew that Syra's words were drawing him thither. Tom would be there, and into Tom's life he was determined to force himself again.

A few yards from the door he met Walter Varden, who was hurrying in the opposite direction.

The medical student stopped short when he

saw the singer, and recognized him in the yellow light of an open shop-window.

"Hallo, Crozier!" he said, rather breathlessly. "Going to Myra's? They want you there. Hell of a row going on! A couple of German fellows have found their way into the inner bar somehow. The men did not like it, of course, and when they began making up to Syra things began to look black. Then one of them said something to the other about her in German, and Valliant flared up. He understood it, it appears, but nobody else did. I think there is going to be a scrimmage."

Crozier moved away a step or two.

"So," he said, in a withering undertone, "you have discovered a convenient engagement elsewhere!"

He walked rapidly on, and only partially heard Varden, who was left explaining to the lamp-post that he "er . . . er had to meet a fella."

As the singer passed through the outer bar, Myra looked into his face with a ludicrous mixture of anxiety and bewilderment written upon her round features.

“Oh, Mr. Crozier,” she exclaimed, asthmatically, “I don’t know what they’re doing inside at all. I’m afraid they’re quarrelling!”

Through the folds of the curtain came, however, only the sound of one voice—the light tones of Tom Valliant, with an uncomfortably strained ring in its lower pitch.

“I’ll count six,” he was saying, “and at the word six out you go! . . . One . . . two . . .”

And Crozier drew back the curtain. He took in the whole situation at a glance. The two Germans were standing with their backs towards him at the top of the two steps, while Tom Valliant stood before them pointing towards the curtain. His face was not only colourless—it was livid, and there was in his dark eyes a steady, cruel glitter.

“Three . . .” he uttered harshly, as Crozier passed into the inner room, allowing the curtains to fall together behind him.

Both the foreigners were bigger men than Valliant, and undoubtedly more powerful. They were hesitating painfully before that bloodless face. It was braver to be a coward then; and

to their credit it must be recorded that they did not fear the man so much as the possible consequences to himself of this wild rage. That was the cause of their hesitation whether to go or not. Crozier had no time to judge, no moment in which to consider whether the foreigners were to blame for an ungentlemanly act which warranted Valliant's indignation, or whether they had merely trespassed against the customs of a strange country through ignorance or heedlessness, just as we Englishmen trespass against the customs of every land wherein we travel.

Without a moment's hesitation he placed himself between Valliant and the intruders, an action which no other man would have dared just then.

"Out of this!" he said, in a dull, hard tone.
"Out of this at once!"

Valliant was grasping the counter with one slim hand, the other was pressed to his side as if to quell a sudden pain. He stepped forward, and stood side by side with his friend, but said no word—made no attempt to interfere. Crozier had taken up the quarrel where he had been forced to drop it, without inquiry, without a

shred of justice perhaps ; but he was content that it was Tom Valliant's quarrel, and took upon himself the responsibility of carrying it through in his masterly, self-restraining fashion.

There was a half-emptied tankard of beer upon the counter, and with his soft fat hand the German pointed to it.

"But," he argued, "I have not paid for my drink !"

"I will pay for your drink," replied Crozier, with a short, disagreeable laugh. "Out you go !"

The foreigners both smiled in a sickly way, and he whose quarrel it was shrugged his shoulders and stretched out his hands towards the tankard, but Crozier was before him. He did not hurl the metal cup to the ground, or spill a single drop of its contents, but he drew it calmly away.

The German looked quickly round the room. There were half-a-dozen men present who stood idly watching, and into the Teutonic mind there entered no gleam of intelligence to explain their idleness ; he had no conception of the meaning of the word "fair-play," and never imagined that a difference in numbers would be respected. In

his calmer moments this difference had restrained him, but now he lost sight of it.

“My beer,” he said, doggedly, holding out his hand. “Give me my beer!”

And there followed a few muttered words in guttural German.

“Be careful!” said Crozier, with singular softness. “I understand German.”

The foreigner looked into the stalwart singer’s face, and something there drove the colour from his cheeks, while his hand dropped to his side.

“My friend counted as far as three,” continued the Englishman. “I will go on where he left off. . . Four . . .”

There was no ring of passion in this voice, but its gentleness was even less pleasant to listen to.

Then the foreigners shuffled restlessly with their feet, and the younger man, who had not hitherto spoken, muttered a few pacific words and touched his friend’s sleeve. Before Crozier could say “five” they were gone, and the heavy curtains hung motionless.

There was for some seconds an awkward

stillness in the little room, which was ultimately broken by a squarely-built middle-aged man, who came forward with his hands in his pockets, and looked critically at the steps leading down into the outer bar. This man was a poet, more or less successful, very lazy, and a noted big-game hunter.

"That would have been an awkward fall, Sam," he said critically, "for Germanicus to go down backwards. I saw you measuring the distance with your eye."

Crozier laughed in a constrained manner.

"Yes," he said, "beastly place to land on the back of one's head."

"I expect," said some one in the background, "that Sam's ocular measurement settled the matter. Deutscher saw the evil glance, and thought of his mother."

In Syra's sanctum men laughed easily, and under cover of the merriment that followed this graceful sally, the singer met the girl's eyes fixed persistently on his face. Although breathing somewhat hurriedly, as could be seen by the rise and fall of her close black dress, she was

apparently attending to her duties with a customary calmness. But when she caught Crozier's glance a momentary gleam of life passed across her face. Her eyes and lids said to him quite plainly—

“Take him away!”

With an almost imperceptible nod he reassured her, but carefully avoided looking towards Tom Valliant, who was sipping his weak whiskey-and-water with a faint and slightly embarrassed smile.

“Syra,” he said aloud, in his usual semi-bantering tone, “have you any of that tepid and opaque coffee for which you are justly celebrated at this time of night, because I should like some?”

She tossed her head with mechanical sauciness and an appropriate smile, as she drew the desired beverage, clear, and brown and hot from the urn.

“Some people,” she said, as she handed him the cup, and pushed sugar-basin and cream-jug towards him noiselessly, neatly, rapidly, “are never satisfied.”

“No,” chimed in a grave journalist, who, being an Irish Roman Catholic, wrote for a Methodist weekly organ. “No, I expect when Sam is placed among the baritones in the heavenly choir, he will complain that his halo is a misfit.”

“And,” suggested a star of the comic-opera, mischievously, with his nose in a long glass which contained nothing more poisonous than lemon squash, “and will refuse the engagement.”

This was a decided hit for Crozier, and was accordingly well received. The laugh was very much against the singer, and he smiled with quiet appreciation of the situation.

And so the conversation went on. Not very brilliant, you will say; not worthy of the unquestionable genius possessed by some of the speakers; not such as a man like Samuel Crozier—who possessed the elements of good somewhere hidden in his being—should take part in. Perhaps even, you opine, that it is not worth my while to write, and yours to read.

But what is the picture you have in your

mind's eye—if you are troubling to think of these printed lines at all? A little bar-room—flaring gas, and dissolute faces seen through a noxious haze of tobacco-smoke. One beautiful face (if you will please allow it) painted and rendered horrible by the touch of art; idle, artificial conversation falling from the lips of men endowed with talents and even genius above the common ruck; talk that is totally unworthy of them; doubtful jokes upon matters too high and too holy for the touch of ridicule; coarse personalities; vulgar allusions to sacred thoughts and things. Yes, such is the picture; such the surface of the canvas! But there may be a perspective worthy of further note. There may be good work in an evil thing.

What if these men were talking nonsense with an object? What if the dissolute minds were aiding each other in an act of human kindness? Think you that, because Syra's eyelids were gently touched with black pencil, the eyes beneath were blind to the sufferings of her fellow-creatures—blind to all save her own immediate gain? If you think that—if you think

it of any human eyes—I can teach you nothing, though my years may treble yours. But some there are who will see a motive in Syra's impertinent words when she handed Crozier his coffee. Some will detect a quick grasp and furtherance of that object in the Roman Catholic journalist's profane pleasantry—for he was almost a bigot ; and a further clever aid in the burlesque actor's hit at Crozier, for *he* laboured under an exaggerated sense of gratitude towards the singer, who had helped him upwards by a timely recommendation.

Nor was the object difficult to reach. Near the counter Tom Valliant stood white and dazed. At times he sipped his whiskey-and-water in a peculiar, slow way ; waiting after each mouthful, as if it were a question whether he could swallow it or not. He was breathing hard, and his left hand was still pressed to his side.

And so they laughed and talked nonsense, heeding him not until he was partially recovered, when Crozier announced his intention of moving homewards, as he was tired out.

“Coming, Tom?” he inquired, casually. “Come and have a pipe in my rooms.”

And he waited, so that Valliant could not but accept. As they passed through the curtained doorway together, Crozier took his companion’s arm in a friendly, affectionate way, which they all knew was quite unlike his reserved habit.





CHAPTER III.

DIPLOMACY.

NEITHER spoke for some time, not indeed until they had left the noisy region of the Strand. Then Tom broke the silence. He had evidently noticed his companion's sudden display of affection, which had taken the form of linked arms.

"I hope, old fellow," he said lightly, "that you are not under the impression that I am screwed."

If Crozier laughed there was no sound in his laughter; but the tone of his voice when he replied was such as would have led one to the belief that he was smiling—no doubt at the absurdity of his friend's notion.

"No, I should say you were as sober as a

judge. There is no visible tendency to poor steering."

No other words passed between them before they reached Lime Court. Crozier opened the door with his latch-key. Valliant went in first, and, having climbed the stairs slowly, passed into the sitting-room before his friend, turning up the gas and throwing his hat on to the piano, while the singer followed and closed the door—just as they had done hundreds of times before.

"Whiskey—water—biscuits—baccy," said the host, with monosyllabic hospitality, as he placed the articles mentioned upon the table.

There were half-a-dozen unopened letters upon the writing-table near the window, and these Crozier took up and brought forward beneath the gas. Then he proceeded to open them without anticipation or curiosity, as one learns to open business letters.

Presently Tom, who had been thoughtfully munching biscuit after biscuit, looked up with his sunny smile.

"That German deserved chucking out," he said tentatively.

Crozier was reading a letter with a slight contraction of the eyelids amounting almost to a frown, and he looked down over the paper without relaxing his features.

“Um . . . eh? Oh, yes—he deserved chucking out.”

“Because,” continued Tom, without appearing to notice his friend’s absence of mind—“because he was sober. Had he been half-seas over I would have forgiven him.”

Crozier agreed vaguely in an unintelligible monosyllable, and turned towards the writing-table, where he opened his small diary of engagements. Clearly he did not wish to discuss the incident of Syra’s sanctum—the subject had no interest for him, and he was nervously desirous that Tom should forget about it as soon as possible.

He came forward again into the middle of the room, with the letter still in his hand.

“Here is a piece of bad luck,” he said, with singularly little sign of regret or disappointment in his voice. “An afternoon concert on the day of Mrs. Gibb’s dance.”

Valliant looked up sharply. Then he shrugged his shoulders and took a bit of biscuit.

“Oh, hang the afternoon concert!”

“I cannot hang it, my boy,” said Crozier, with a smile. “I must go and raise my angel voice—by special request of Royalty!”

“By special request . . .” exclaimed Tom, neatly catching the letter which his companion threw towards him. “Oh, lor . . . Royalty! I think I should like to go home at once. You are getting too great a swell altogether for me, Sam.”

Crozier stood with his hands in his pockets, thinking deeply, while his companion read the letter.

“Yes,” said Tom, after a moment’s silence, “your little hash is settled—to use a vulgar but expressive simile. You will have to sing or flee the country.”

Then the result of Crozier’s meditations came forth.

“I will tell you what I will do,” he said, practically. “I will sing my song, and then bolt for Waterloo in time for that train we went down

by once—the five . . . something . . . which gets down in time for dinner at seven. I will be dressed, so that I shall be ready for anything. You will go down earlier?”

Tom moved in the deep arm-chair and crossed his legs. He had quite recovered his usual faint pink colour now, and was smiling meditatively.

“Yes,” he said, “that will do. If — *bien entendu*—you think it worth your while.”

Crozier yawned.

“Oh yes,”—politely—“of course it is worth my while. I suppose we need not come up by a very early train the next morning. Will you go down on the day of the dance, or sooner still? I should, if I were you. It is ridiculous troubling about Saint Antony’s; you will never be a doctor.”

Tom laughed in his silent, infectious way.

“Not if I am aware of the fact,” he confessed, in a low tone.

“Then why attend these beastly lectures? Why learn a lot of things which are not only useless but unpleasant, and can do you nothing but harm? Surely there is nothing to be gained

by investigating human misery, and it ought not to be an amusement for any man."

Valliant laughed in his most flippant and aggravating way, but made no reply.

"It would be much better for you to get out of all this," continued Crozier, unabashed and quite undaunted by his companion's merriment. "What is the good of your frittering away your time between St. Antony's and Myra's, doing absolutely no good? You ought to be down in the country living a quiet, healthy life, and drawing from morning till night, out of doors if possible."

Valliant was still smiling, but there was a little unsteadiness in his lower lip—so trifling that his companion did not notice it. He remained silent.

"It is not only from that point of view that the fact is evident that you should get out of this. Myra's—is not what it used to be, Tom. The ragamuffin element is on the increase, and the medical on the wane. The best men from St. Antony's don't go there now. It does a fellow's reputation no good to be known as an *habitué*."

"Does that matter?"—unsteadily, with a touch of bitterness.

"Yes," answered the singer very gravely. "It does. It matters very much."

His pipe was in his mouth, but the tobacco was not lighted. From his pocket he drew a small silver match-box, and shook it tentatively, only to find it empty. Then he went to the mantelpiece, where a larger box stood always full. Slowly he proceeded to fill the smaller one with great deliberation, dropping each match in separately. As he did this he spoke in an even, speculative voice.

"I have always thought that a man's reputation is a thing which he should keep clean and bright for the edification of his women-folk . . . It matters to you, Tom, what people say and think, because . . ." He broke off in order to light his pipe, and apparently forgot to complete the sentence. "For me it is different," he added, as he threw the match away.

"I suppose," murmured Tom, by way of filling up an awkward silence, "that it will be all the same a hundred years hence."

“No,” corrected Crozier at once, “that is precisely what it will not be. It will be quite different. There again is a distinction between us. I have a certain power *now* over people ; I can make them pay seven-and-sixpence for a stall in St. James’s Hall, or the Albert Hall ; I can even make them shed a furtive tear when they are in the stall ; but in a hundred years there will be absolutely nothing left—no shred of memory. An old song here and there, brown and musty, will record that it was sung by Crozier ; and some one idly turning the forgotten music will perhaps wonder for a moment who Crozier was and how he sang. But with you it is quite another matter. If you choose, you can be a living, speaking individuality to generations not yet born. Your drawings can teach them to understand the poetry of an age which has faded from living memory.”

“But,” suggested Tom, half seriously, “I don’t care a hang for generations yet unborn. I am afraid that I am not thinking of them.”

Crozier looked down at him quietly. He was standing in his favourite position on the

hearthrug, with his shoulder against the corner of the mantelpiece and his hands in his pockets.

“No more am I,” he said gently ; “no more am I, Tom ! I am thinking of you.”

Valliant looked up quickly and almost furtively. It was the glance of a man who, possessing a secret, fears that it has long been discovered ; but Crozier’s smile reassured him.

“Yes,” he said, wearily, “I know you are, old man. There must be many more profitable subjects to think about.”

He rose and took his hat, turning towards his friend with a sunny smile.

“Come,” he said, lightly, “we are getting serious, which will never do. It suits neither of us. I cannot do it at all, and when you try you only become dull and uninteresting. I am desperately sleepy, and so will make a graceful exit.”

Crozier did not move, so Valliant crossed the room towards him, holding out his hand.

“Good night, Sam.”

“Good night !”

Crozier allowed him to go as far as the door

before he spoke. Then he raised his voice a little, and the words fell very clearly from his lips.

“If you should go down earlier to Goldheath,” he suggested, “I can bring any flowers, or things you may require.”

“Flowers . . . ? Oh yes! Yes, you might do that, Sam—if it is not giving you too much trouble. I had forgotten about flowers, though of course they have them down there, but not the proper sort.”

“Stephanotis, I suppose,” murmured Crozier, between puffs of smoke, “and perhaps some white lilac.”

Tom was standing just outside the door beneath a gas jet. He was very pale, and there were dark rims round his weary eyes. He pushed his hat on to the back of his head and stretched himself in an unnatural way, passing his hand across his brow.

“Are those her . . . the proper thing for such an occasion?” he inquired, with a faint suggestion of humorous sarcasm.

“I should think so,” answered the singer, with untruthful doubt.

“Right. I should be much obliged if you would bring them down ; but don’t trouble too much about it.”

“Oh, no trouble,” said Crozier, indifferently.

With a little nod Tom continued his way down-stairs, and presently banged the front-door behind him.

The singer still leant against the mantelpiece and smoked placidly. He was particularly wide awake, and evidently had no intention of going to bed for some time. So far was this intention from his thoughts that he presently brought writing materials, and laid them upon the table in the centre of the room, sitting down before them with leisurely energy. All the while he hummed a tune beneath his breath. There were many letters before him, and these he proceeded to investigate for a second time with methodical precision ; his small diary open before him. The royal concert was duly noted, and the letter laid aside for reply the next morning. Many other letters were treated in a similar manner—most of them being bare-faced impositions, practised under the cloak of charity, upon his good-nature.

At last he came to a note written in a spidery hand upon black-edged paper. There was something singularly suggestive of the lodging-house-keeper about this communication. The post-mark on the envelope was Bristol. Crozier read it through slowly, and placed it in his breast-pocket.

“So Holdsworth is free,” he said to himself, “and I am richer by seventy pounds a year. She has got away from him at last; but I shall not tell him until I go down to Goldheath.”

Then he turned to a batch of advertisements, mostly from ship-chandlers, riggers, and provision-merchants in and about Cowes. These disposed of, he drew the writing-case towards him, and for the first time in his life wrote the words, “Dear Elma,” at the head of a sheet of note-paper. The ink slowly dried on his pen while he contemplated them, but he was lost in no sentimental dreams. He was merely wondering whether he should be weakly scrupulous, which would be dangerous, or boldly diplomatic. He reflected that Elma was always the first down in the morning, and the letters were placed upon

the plates of those persons to whom they were addressed. It was marvellous how well versed he was in the movements and habits of the Valliant household. It was therefore a very easy matter to get a letter into Elma's hands without the knowledge of her parents. Bold diplomacy was therefore his wisest method. If the letter got into other hands no actual harm would follow, but he preferred that Elma should alone be aware of its contents, and the rest must be left to her womanly wit.

"Can you," he wrote, "without allowing your name or mine to appear, arrange that Tom be invited to go and stay at Goldheath for a few days, until the Vicarage dance? Let the letter be from your mother, and the sooner he receives it the better. If possible, let this note be destroyed, and forgotten at once. I have good reasons for writing it, but must ask you to trust me until to-day week, when I hope to go to Goldheath."

He ceased writing, dried the letter carefully with a sheet of blotting-paper, and sat, pen in hand, thinking.

"If," he reflected, "this gets into the old lady's hands the whole affair will be muddled, and I will be forced to tell her more than I want to, or let her think more than she ought to. But I must risk that . . . I must also risk . . . whatever Elma may think of me. She is the only person who can help me with Tom now. The fact that I am doing it for Tom's good may occur to her, and that will be all she wants, I think."

He added the words, "Yours very truly," and signed his full name formally.

Then he took another sheet of paper and wrote quickly without hesitation—

"DEAR LEONARD,

"See Tom Valliant to-morrow if you can without awakening his suspicions. Don't let him know that you have heard from me. He got into a row to-night at Myra's, and I would have given thirty pounds to have had you there. Of course I am utterly ignorant from a medical point of view ; but it seems to me that he had a close shave of something or other. He does

not know that I noticed anything. I brought him here for a smoke, and he has just gone to Craven Street apparently perfectly well, but I am rather uneasy about him. Am trying to arrange *sub rosa* that he gets away into the country.

“Yours,

“SAM CROZIER.”

The singer folded the letter, and addressed it to Dr. Leonard, at Saint Antony's, and before going to bed he went down-stairs and dropped both communications into the old pillar-box let into the wall of No. 11, Lime Court.





U. OF ILL. LIB.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PLOT.

ELMA was exceptionally punctual the next morning, but the squire was before her.

When she entered the little library she found her father standing at the window contemplating the walled garden where the white-frost lay in parts. After placing her morning salutation airily upon his white moustache, she turned to the breakfast-table with an eye upon the coffee-pot. Then she perceived that there were three letters upon her plate.

“Ah,” she said in a pleased voice, “letters. Letters for me!”

The squire glanced over his shoulder with an affectionate smile upon his ruddy face, but Elma’s back was turned towards him, and so

she lost it. Her averted face was quite grave, and she was holding one letter in her hand, reading the address in a curious, still way; the others lay unheeded on the table. Presently she slipped the letter into her pocket and opened the other two energetically with the prong of a fork. While she read them the squire stood by the window whistling softly to himself the air of an old hunting song, of which the memory had been awakened by the sunny morning, still air, and harmless white-frost, which would presently melt away, leaving the ground quite soft.

After a little while she placed the dishes within the fender.

"Mother is very late this morning," she observed, suggestively.

"Yes," answered the old gentleman, replying to the unasked question in her voice, "she was not nearly ready when I came down."

Elma came and stood beside her father in the full light of the window—a cheery, bright little maiden, straight as an arrow, absurdly young in figure and expression.

"Will you drive with me to the meet to-day

or ride?" she asked, divining in which direction lay her father's thoughts.

"I must ride to-day," was the reply, uttered merrily with palms slowly rubbed together; "I must ride to-day, little woman."

"But no breaking away," she said, warningly, with a smile upon her parted lips; "no profanity, and following the hounds when you promised not to."

The squire laughed and chuckled with great enjoyment. It was a known fact in the countryside that if the hounds found while the squire was on horseback within sound, he would begin by swearing in a round old-fashioned way at the infirmities of age, and finish by following almost as straight as in his younger days.

Elma knew that she never had him safely unless he was in the carriage beside her, and she was fully aware that the old sportsman loved to be reminded of his weakness.

She laughed a little in concert, and then turning slowly she left the room without saying another word. Crossing the hall, she entered the dining-room with one hand in the pocket of her dress.

There was no one there. The pale wintry sun shone through the tall window and divided the old carpet into squares. The fire had not long been lighted, so the wood crackled still, and there was a pleasant odour of burning resin in the air.

There had been a slight frost, and the atmosphere of this large room was decidedly chilly, but Elma did not seem to notice it. She went to the window, and standing there drew the letter from her pocket. There was nothing surreptitious in her manner, no desire of concealment, but she had already obeyed one of Sam Crozier's requests without having seen inside the envelope.

She read the laconic note carefully, and finding that the contents coincided with her own (alas!) natural instinct, she concealed the paper in the bosom of her dress in order to insure greater safety. This she did somewhat hurriedly because her mother was on the stairs; and, with quick—what shall we say?—*tact*, remained motionless while Mrs. Valliant passed the open door. Again I must repeat that there was no

surreptitiousness in her thoughts or movements. A little concealment, a little dissimulation, and a little falsehood are necessary if human beings wish to live together in anything like harmony. This is to be lamented, of course, but we cannot help it.

Elma Valliant was inconsistent in her blind obedience and bold disregard, shown in the same moment. Without comment she recognized that the fact of her having received a letter from the singer was to be suppressed, merely of course because he said so, because it would assist him in some scheme of which she knew absolutely nothing! Ah—that instinct of concealment, how beautifully naïve it is! But she chose to disregard his practical suggestion, that their object would be ensured and aided by the destruction of the letter without delay. Of course it would. There could be no two opinions upon the matter; and how like a man to suggest such an obvious necessity to a woman! Again, how like a woman to ignore the suggestion, and run a greater risk for no visible satisfaction. Elma smiled as she read Sam's warning words.

Clumsy, blind old Sam ! Surely he might have guessed that she knew much more about such small diplomatic matters than he. Fancy, my brothers, teaching a woman how to sweetly tell and carry out a white lie ! Such a letter as Elma had received must of course be destroyed at once, and its attendant incidents forgotten. Therefore she thrust it into her dress, buttoning up carefully. I offered her five shillings for it only the other day, at which she blushed very prettily, and changed the subject without delay. The other day ?—Did I say the other day ? It was about seven years ago.

Crozier had asked her to trust him until he could explain matters with his own lips, and she did so. No question seemed to arise within her mind as to whether he was acting prudently and for the best. She knew that he had run some risk of misconstruction, and that he had also placed her in a similar position, but for this she bore him no ill-will. Indeed she appeared to find some pleasure in sharing the danger, which is always a more serious matter for women than for men. She never doubted that his action

was the wisest possible under circumstances which had evidently arisen somewhat suddenly, and in a cheery, confident way she undertook to assist him.

Of course she could manage the task allotted to her, and would willingly have had it harder. Such little things are safe in a woman's hands; they can do them so neatly, especially with the aid of a pair of innocent eyes and a ready little smile.

Thinking over these and other subjects, Elma fell into a reverie, out of which she was presently awakened by the clink of china coming from the library.

She crossed the room and stood in front of the fireplace. There she tore up the envelope which Sam had dropped into the pillar-box in Lime Court the night before, and threw the pieces on to the burning coals, where they were soon consumed.

"He is so stupid," she whispered to the flames, with a very soft gleam in her eyes. "I should like to write back to him—a long letter, on two sheets, and all I should say would be: 'I don't

love Tom—I don't love Tom—I don't love Tom.' ”

* * * * *

“It will give so much extra work to the servants,” argued Mrs. Valliant, when the squire found that he had actually proposed to ask Tom Valliant down to stay a week or so, including the Vicarage dance. The old gentleman did not exactly know how the subject had cropped up, or how it occurred that he should make such a daring proposal. We must ask Elma about that. However, he had done it, and his genial spirit of hospitality was aroused. Moreover, the prospect of a jolly meet, and the sight of a cloudy sky which almost spoke of spring and called a truce on hunting, exhilarated him. He was hopelessly genial and exalted—required snubbing, in fact, as old gentlemen sometimes do, and Mrs. Valliant presently saw to that, because it was strictly within her department.

“It will give so much extra work to the servants,” she said, with a half-suppressed sigh of resignation, as if the scullery-maid's work were about to fall upon her shoulders.

“I will get up early and polish the grates,” said the squire, winking obviously at Elma. There was the sound, even, of a wink in his genial voice.

The woman who had possessed for twenty-five years one of the best husbands in England, smiled in a chilly, heartless manner, and shrugged her shoulders.

“I think we can manage without that,” she observed, with great dignity.

The squire was irrepressible. It was all owing to that light, south-westerly breeze, which has a frivolous way of getting into men’s veins.

“Oh,” he said, with a chuckle, “don’t hesitate to make use of me. Any trifling service of the description mentioned, you know, my dear, will be a pleasure to me.”

This daring impertinence would have settled the matter finally had Mrs. Valliant been indifferent respecting Tom’s visit. But she was not so. She wanted him to come, for he was dear to her, after her manner—the manner of a hard woman who has never known the love of a son, which is quite different from that of a

daughter, inasmuch as it is daring and often arbitrary. And it would almost appear that a woman values love in ratio to the greatness of its demands and heartlessness of its subsequent ingratitude.

"I will write to him this morning," said Mrs. Valliant, with some condescension, and there the matter rested.

Elma hardly seemed to notice the final decision. She was occupied with a collection of crumbs, for which a small feathered tribe was patiently waiting outside the window.

"I hope," she reflected, as she tapped the bread-tray with a knife, "that he will be content with my share of this deep scheme. But . . . but I suppose it will only confirm his suspicion that I care for Tom."

Two days later Tom Valliant arrived at Goldheath. Elma was at the station to meet him. She had driven over alone, having effected the arrangement with some difficulty. But she was anxious to see the first of her cousin—anxious, in an indefinite desire to speak to him before any one else. She thought that he might bring

some explanation of Crozier's unusual action—rendered more peculiar by the fact that the singer excelled more in a masterly stillness than in moving. During the first greeting, however, she learnt that Tom knew nothing of the letter to which he owed his presence in the little pony-cart by her side; and the realization of how much Crozier had left to chance and her own quick wit came as a shock at the same time. Once or twice already there had been occasions on which it would have been so perilously easy to make a mistake. Notably, in the first instance, on the receipt of the letter; in the second, on greeting her cousin at the station.

Nevertheless, Tom Valliant had brought the explanation with him. It was written round his eyes, and in the lines that appeared near his clean shaven lips when his face was in repose. She did not read, but unconsciously touched upon it.

“I will not inquire,” she said merrily, “what time you went to bed last night, or whether you went to bed at all. It may be a delicate subject,

but your appearance might, in mixed society, lead to unpleasant questions."

He glanced at her keenly. It was a mere flash of his quick eyes, unnoticed by her in the absorption of rounding a sharp corner with a home-going pony. Then he laughed.

"When a jaded, overworked son of toil comes down from the restless city," he said, with dramatic gravity, "is it kind to presume upon rosy cheeks and a digestion untouched by midnight oil—to cast his complexion in his face, so to speak, and to attribute a becoming pallor to the worst possible causes? Now you would not imagine, I suppose, that I attended a Young Men's Christian lecture last night—would you?"

"No," she answered severely, "I would not."

He shrugged his shoulders with great resignation.

"It is no good," he said meekly, "talking to you, if you begin by doubting a hitherto spotless veracity."

Thus they began, and thus they went on during the few days that followed. Both seemed to be under a nervous apprehension of some sort.

Both were terribly afraid of becoming grave—of treating any subject seriously.

On the surface, however, they were both in excellent spirits, and superficial things are often deeper than we reckon. Where would human happiness, human merriment, and human laughter be without the superficial?





CHAPTER V.

FLOWERS.

BY good fortune Crozier succeeded in carrying out his plans for the evening of Mrs. Gibb's ball at Goldheath. He sang his two songs, received his applause with the usual grave bow, and rushed off to Waterloo Station in the quickest hansom obtainable.

There was a slight delay at Covent Garden, where he called for some flowers ordered and selected a few hours earlier; nevertheless he caught the train, and at five minutes to seven stood beneath the broad porch of Goldheath Court. From the cold gusty night he passed into the cheery, thickly-carpeted hall, where a fire burnt ruddily with many a gleam upon ancient flint-lock and holster pistol suspended upon the walls.

In the centre, near the table, stood Elma, a vision of soft clinging silks and incomprehensible gauze. She had just run down-stairs, swinging gloves and fan in her hand, and was consequently breathless.

"So you have done it," she gasped, as she held out her bare hand with a smile of welcome.

"Yes," he answered, quickly removing his glove before shaking hands. "I knew I could manage it. There was really plenty of time."

He laid the flowers on the table previous to removing his thick coat, and Elma looked supremely unconscious of their presence.

"I hope the flowers are right," he said, glancing back over his shoulder as he turned to hang up his coat and hat. The servant had vanished with his bag a moment before.

Elma took up the odorous informal bouquet which he had thrown down somewhat recklessly, and raised it to her face. She changed colour suddenly, blushing almost painfully.

"They . . . are lovely," she murmured unevenly.

He had come back into the middle of the room

and was standing before her, looking down at the flowers with a critical wisdom.

“I suppose white flowers are always safe?” he said with what seemed to her forced carelessness.

“Yes,” she answered, rather vaguely, as if she had not caught the meaning of his words; “yes, I should think so.”

“I mean that they will go with almost any dress ”

“Oh yes—almost any dress.”

“I thought so,” he said, earnestly, as if a load had been lifted from his mind—as if one of the unanswered questions of his existence had found a reply at last.

He had removed his coat, laid aside his hat, and pulled down his waistcoat. There was nothing to detain them any longer in the hall, but still they lingered.

“Thank you very much . . .” she began, but he stopped her by laying his hand hurriedly upon her bare arm, pressing harder than he was aware of.

“They are not from me,” he interrupted,

speaking rapidly; "I brought them for Tom—by Tom's order, I mean—for him to give to you."

She half turned away, burying her face among the white flowers with a nod signifying that she understood. Then she looked up into his face with a quaint little smile.

"Thank you very much, then," she said, "for bringing them. I may thank you, I suppose, for having taken some trouble in the matter, although I must express my gratitude to Tom for having thought of it."

He smiled in response, but there was a singular expression upon his lips which failed to coincide with the perfectly natural light in his eyes.

"It was no trouble," he said, indifferently, making at the same time a distinct movement towards the drawing-room door. She could not but obey his suggestion.

"I expected that Tom would have told you about the flowers," he said, as he followed her towards the drawing-room, which was at the other end of a passage; "and my expectation

was more or less confirmed by the fact that you came down-stairs without any."

"I never put my flowers on until the last moment," she observed, in a tone of vast experience, "otherwise they would be dead before the evening was half over."

He made no answer, and they passed into the drawing-room in silence.

"I should like to know," she reflected rapidly, "as a mere matter of curiosity, who really thought of it—whose idea it really was to bring flowers down from London."

"I wonder," he meditated, "whether she has other flowers up-stairs, or if she . . ."

Here Mrs. Valliant came forward with outstretched hand and a few formal words of welcome.

A few moments later Tom appeared, looking very graceful and refined in his evening dress. Elma held up the flowers, which she was in the act of placing in a bowl of water in the darkest and coolest corner of the drawing-room."

"These delicate attentions, *mon cousin*," she said gaily, "are overpowering."

“Ah!” he exclaimed, as if he had forgotten all about them, or as if the matter were really of small interest—“Ah—vegetables.”

He crossed the room and sniffed at them.

“The delicacy of the attention is not the only thing about them which will be overpowering before this entertainment is over, I am thinking. How are you, Samuel? Why did you bring such smelly ones?”

“Smelly ones!” echoed Elma, indignantly; “they are lovely. There is nothing so sweet on earth as stephanotis.”

Tom laughed derisively.

“Give me,” he said, addressing Crozier with tragically outstretched arm, “a flower that has no smell—the humble daisy, the azure cornflower, the sustaining cauliflower.”

“I am afraid,” answered Crozier with perfect gravity, “that I have not got one at the moment.”

Only Tom remained grave. He shrugged his shoulders with a great show of disgust.

“The man,” he muttered, “has no poetry in him.” And turning sharply round he arranged

his tie with the aid of a Venetian looking-glass suspended above the mantelpiece.

“But, Tom,” said Elma presently, taking up the unfinished argument, “do you mean seriously to say that you prefer flowers without smell?”

“I do,” he said. “There is nothing so depressing as the smell of white flowers. Mind I like it, but it depresses me. It is the sentiment of the thing, I am afraid. Were I a school-girl the odour of flowers would make me think of the moon, the shimmering sea, soft twilight hours, the midnight song of the cucumber—the nightingale, I mean—and similar unsatisfactory things. Being a man, I am consumed with a great desire to smoke instead. Perhaps it is a mere matter of past association. I never thought of that before. Sam always wears a spray of stephanotis when he can get it, which no doubt accounts for the whole business.”

He laughed and looked towards Crozier. Elma laughed also, but chanced to look in exactly the opposite direction. The singer met his friend's eyes and smiled obediently. He had been talking with Mrs. Valliant, and was without the least

knowledge of what he was expected to smile at—but that did not matter much.

Then the dinner-bell sounded through the house, and the squire came into the room, groaning and holding his back, but smiling genially nevertheless. He was a truly hospitable man in the good old-fashioned manner; loved to see strange faces round his table—more especially young faces. This evening he was resplendent in dress-clothes of an earlier date, with onyx buttons on the waistcoat, and three honest rubies on his broad and manly breast. The groan meant nothing, and in nowise disquieted the ladies. They knew that it was only geniality, which usually takes the form of a noise of some description, and a painless grunt is preferable to the aggravating drawing-in of breath through closed teeth, which is a more common sign.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, holding out his broad brown hand, “Sam, my boy. Glad to see you! The singer, eh? The Royal minstrel—ha, ha, *ha*! How did you get on?”

“Splendidly, thanks!”

“Congratulate you, my boy! Congratulate

you ! Only wish your good father was here to do the same," said the old gentleman, squaring his arms and pulling down his waistcoat with a cheery jerk.

"He doesn't look as if he were fresh from the presence of Royalty, does he ?" suggested Tom, "except that his hair is a trifle ruffled on this side."

The singer passed his hand scientifically over his crisply curled head.

"That," he answered readily, "is where I tore it when the cab-horse slid down Wellington Street on its shoulder."

"Ha, ha, *ha!*" laughed the squire, tailing off apoplectically into subsidiary chuckles, at the end of which he looked suddenly grave and turned to Crozier.

"Must congratulate you also," he said, in the confidential manner of a stage aside, "upon that other matter—the money, eh ? Don't invest it in a Dock Company. You needn't be afraid of horseflesh, but avoid the turf—sailors never learn the ropes there."

Crozier's reply was lost in the rustle of Mrs.

Valliant's silks as she moved austere-ly towards the door.

"Elma, my dear," said the old gentleman, with a preliminary groan, "I am afraid I will not be able to have that polka with you to-night; my lumbago . . ."

"But you must, papa; I never let my partners off like that. Lumbago or no lumbago, once the name is on my programme there is no turning back. Besides, I heard you running down-stairs just now when we were in the drawing-room."

There was a break in the conversation, while all heads were solemnly bowed over the table, and the squire's shirt-front bulged audibly.

"Thank-God!" observed the old fellow, reverently—the briefest of brief graces, which never failed to make Tom smile.

"My dear child," he continued in the same breath, with twinkling eyes, "I am seriously ill. It came on suddenly, with a sort of click, when I was twisting round to try and let out the strap at the back of my dress . . ."

"Don't you take soup, Mr. Crozier?" inquired

Mrs. Valliant suddenly, with a sharp glance at each of her servants in turn, just to see whether their sensitive nerves had been affected, no doubt.

The squire finished his remark by a comprehensive and very evident wink over his soup-spoon.

Tom Valliant was singularly jolly that evening, and his cheeks had a faint pink tinge, not in blotches, but evenly and all over. The dark rings round his eyes had vanished. Evidently the quiet country life of Goldheath suited him admirably. He was also in excellent spirits, and talked almost incessantly, while the squire laughed and held his back with both hands.

It was under the cover of a brilliant sally, at which every one laughed, that Elma spoke a few words under her breath, without looking towards any one in particular; indeed her eyes were lowered to her plate.

“I hope,” were the words, “that you are content with my share in the plot.”

Samuel Crozier was next to her. He glanced in her direction, sideways, along the table-cloth

towards her hands, but said nothing. A few minutes later an opportunity occurred, and he replied—

“I never doubted,” almost in a whisper and ambiguously, but she understood.





CHAPTER VI.

DANGER.

AS Samuel Crozier bowed over Mrs. Gibb's chubby hand, he saw at the other end of the room William Holdsworth. The sailor was no dancer, but he invariably accepted invitations, and really made himself very useful to his hostess in talking to elderly ladies when he could not find a young one without a partner.

Elma's programme was much in request, and Crozier saw that Holdsworth did not ask her to sit out a dance with him. As far as he could judge, indeed, he concluded that they did not speak to each other, more than a few formal words of greeting, during the entire evening. From this he surmised that something had taken place—something which saved him from the

necessity of warning Elma against his old shipmate.

Presently the two men passed close to each other in a tiny room, full of people partaking noisily and merrily of tea and coffee.

“I want to speak to you,” said Crozier in an undertone, after they had nodded casually as slight acquaintances.

Holdsworth looked uncomfortable for a second.

“Crozier is such an extraordinary fellow,” he reflected, “for hearing confidences. I wonder if Elma has told him.”

He need have had no such fear. Elma was in her own estimation singularly capable of taking care of herself. She had an entire reliance in her own strength of purpose, hidden, it may be, beneath smiles and a certain coquetry, but existing nevertheless, and only betrayed by that little square chin and an occasional glance of her changeable eyes. In confidences she never indulged, and of herself she rarely talked. There was one person to whom she never spoke on matters concerning herself, and that man was Samuel Crozier.

Holdsworth looked keenly into his former officer's face. The old "quarter-deck" expression was not there, and the sailor augured from its absence that there was nothing very disagreeable hanging over his unfortunate head.

"Will it take long?" he inquired, audaciously smiling.

Crozier looked at his programme before replying.

"Number seventeen is a *schottische*," he said, in a quietly undeniable manner. "I will not be dancing it. Will you keep yourself free?"

"Yes."

Holdsworth moved away, looking grave, while Crozier turned to greet an asthmatic old parson who had known his father. The sailor again felt a sudden misgiving—a vague sense, as it were, of discomfort—as if some new trouble were at hand. But presently he threw this off, and became the merriest of the merry. He lived for the present to an extraordinary degree, and number one had just begun; number seventeen, the *schottische*, was a long way off.

At times during the evening that disagreeable

possibility of Crozier's having heard of the little scene in a conservatory some weeks before suggested itself to the sailor, but he soon dismissed it with easy confidence. Tom Valliant's manner to himself was friendly in the extreme, which incident closed the most likely channel through which the information might have passed.

The local dancing men found that Elma's programme had been seriously tampered with before she entered the room—the initials "S. C." and "T. V." occurring alternately in brotherly unity at short intervals from top to bottom. Tom Valliant was a very fair dancer, but incorrigibly lazy. He never danced from the first bar of the music to the last, as did his friend. Twice round, and find a seat, was the principle upon which he acted. Elma had long ago ceased to draw his attention to the laziness of this proceeding. She had divined that, much as he loved and invited chaff, all remarks upon the limits of his endurance as regarded dancing were unwelcome. In after years she looked back with thankfulness upon the instinctive feeling which withheld her tongue on this point.

The feelings of certain young Goldheathans upon the subject of London men in general, and two of them in particular, were deep and bitter, causing several *naissant* moustaches to be tugged pugnaciously over Elma's engagement-card; while more than one fallow mind conceived the possibility of Mrs. Valliant's being a less formidable person than was generally supposed. Few of them would have dared to dance four times (had the opportunity been given them, *bien entendu*, by the young person most interested) with the daughter of the squire's wife.

Sam Crozier used to say in his quizzical self-abuse that he was an old stager—a supper bachelor—and his friends believed or disbelieved him as they liked. He only had four dances with Elma scribbled on her engagement-card hastily, but they were the four best waltzes there. Thus, the first was immediately before the Lancers, which he knew Elma would not dance, and by this simple device he secured an opportunity of giving her the explanation he knew, by the glance of her eyes, she was awaiting.

They danced the waltz without speaking many words. Crozier never talked much once the music had begun, and they knew each other well enough to ignore the politer usages of society. As the music slackened with chordal signs of a *finale*, Elma made a tiny movement which he detected at once. It was the almost unconscious signal of a wish to stop and get away before the crowd. They both knew the house well. Elma had run about, up-stairs and down-stairs, since she could run at all, while Crozier was born in the large room above the drawing-room.

And so he led her up the broad shallow steps with her fingers resting on his arm, as he had led her, hand in hand, twenty years before. There was a broad alcove at the head of the stairs, and here they found a sofa. As they seated themselves a sudden rush of voices in the hall beneath told of a breathless multitude seeking rest. The dance was over.

Crozier began at once in his usual straightforward way.

"I wrote to you," he said, "because I wanted

to get Tom away from London. He was regularly out of sorts—required a change, you understand.”

“And so you thought of Goldheath?”

“And so I thought of Goldheath,” he replied, absently, for he was striving to reach the meaning of her tone, which was not quite natural. There was a subtle significance in it which he failed to catch.

“Where else could he—or rather would he—have gone?” said the singer, still striving to divine her thoughts.

She turned towards him with a bright and amused smile.

“Nowhere, of course,” she replied.

Nevertheless Crozier conceived the strange idea that Tom Valliant’s visit had for some reason been distasteful to Elma. He could not be expected to read a woman’s whim. The true reason of her slight displeasure lay so deeply hidden from his eyes, and he was so utterly devoid of vanity, that he never suspected what it was, until the knowledge was forced upon him later.

"I hope," he said, "that it was not inconvenient, but I was really frightened for the moment. Tom is not strong, and the life he leads in town is not such as he ought to lead. I was scared by the thought (suddenly thrust upon me by some one else), that I was more or less responsible. Perhaps I lost my head a little, for I was alone, and it was late at night."

Elma laughed suddenly in a peculiar, impatient way.

"It would be so like you to lose your head," she said, sarcastically, "would it not?"

His deep-set eyes rested for a moment on her pure profile. She was looking straight in front of her, with her two hands resting upon her lap. Her lips were slightly apart, and the expression of her face seemed to demand an answer to the question just asked.

"Perhaps," he suggested, with semi-comic apology, "it requires more than I possess."

"I should think it does," she said, in a bantering tone. Then she added, quite seriously, "It is very good of you to interest yourself so much in Tom. We were very glad to see him."

The extreme conventionality of her remark conveyed to him exactly the opposite meaning to that which she intended. He thought that it was assumed, whereas it was very natural.

"He is much better for the change; I see a great improvement in his appearance," he observed, carelessly, while he attempted to introduce the upper button of his glove into its hole.

"Yes," she answered, "I think he is better. Goldheath has done him good."

He deliberately turned and looked into her face. She bore the scrutiny without changing countenance, but her eyes were a trifle fixed in their expression, while her chin was thrust forward. It was a wonderful thing how well he knew her.

"Elma," he said, in a voice of which the softness would have made his fortune upon the stage, had he not found a better use for it; "Elma, I am afraid I am an old muddler. I have done something stupid. Do you not know me well enough to tell me what it is? Surely it is enough to say that we clambered

together on to this same sofa twenty years ago. We ran about in these same old passages hand in hand, and there was nothing between us then. Did my letter come inopportunately, or has it vexed you? Or do you think that I should have minded my business, and allowed Tom to manage his, or mismanage it, as he thought fit?"

"No," she protested, "I thought nothing of that sort. I was glad to get your letter, and no one has seen it—no one saw it—but myself."

"Then you did not want Tom at Goldheath just now? I forced him upon you at a wrong time."

"Not at all. No . . . but"

She stopped with a little awkward laugh. She was slowly twining and intertwining her gloved fingers, and she swayed a little away from him as if to get farther from a proximitive influence which was becoming too strong for her.

"But what?" he asked, in a measured voice, which seemed to be the result of some effort over himself.

There was a pause of some moments. The

Lancers were in full swing down-stairs, so that the upper part of the house was theirs alone. The music was almost overwhelmed by the shuffling of feet and the buzz of merrily raised voices.

“Oh—nothing,” she said, suddenly throwing herself back in the seat, and looking at him with a determined little smile full of defiance.

“That is right,” he said, calmly, “don’t tell me. It is much better not. There is nothing that one regrets sooner, and more, than unwilling confidences. There are so many things which are better left untold. This is one of them, no doubt. Some day you will abuse me for having been weak for a moment. I should not have tried to make you tell me.”

He spoke rapidly and with evident relief, as if some hidden danger had just been averted. But he could not divert his thoughts at once from the question, and sought to excuse himself for the blunder which he knew nothing of.

“I cannot always understand Tom,” he said, tentatively, “he is so variable. At times he is quite serious and amenable to reason, and

suddenly he will change—laughs at everything, and is apparently perfectly reckless of consequences.”

“You mean,” she suggested, “that he does not dream of misconstruction or deliberate misconception. He never thinks that people may either heedlessly or purposely put his actions in such a light as to render their appearance much worse than it should be.”

Crozier knew now that she had heard something of what Syra had reported as the current gossip of St. Antony’s. It was easy enough to trace this, in imagination, from Walter Varden to Holdsworth, and from Holdsworth, either directly or indirectly, to Elma. The story would most assuredly not have lost weight in transmission, so he faced it squarely, as was his wont.

“You must not,” he said, “on that very account believe all that you hear. People are so apt to add a few graphic touches to stories that pass through their hands. In this matter, Elma, you must believe me before any one else—you have no other course but this. Tom is

as good and upright and as true a gentleman as any man in this house. Some people are beyond the influence of association, and I think he is one of them. He can associate with . . . shady characters, let us call them, and never be the worse for it. But what I do not understand is why he does it. These men are no companions for him. I am *certain* he despises them, and yet he deliberately chooses them for his friends. He knows that I could help him to become acquainted with a better class of men altogether—intellectual fellows, who are doing good in the world both for themselves and others; but he prefers St. Antony's students and their hangers-on. It would almost seem as if for some deliberate purpose he were misrepresenting himself."

"And other people," added Elma, with gentle significance.

He looked at her with a slow, grave smile. She raised her eyes to his, and there was a faint note of warning in her voice as she repeated the words—

"And other people."

He could not pretend to mistake her meaning, and he was chivalrous enough to resist the temptation of compelling her to make it more obvious.

"Yes," he murmured, indifferently, "I suppose so." And with raised eyebrows signified that it did not matter much.

"You think," she asked, "that it does not matter?"

"Not much," was the reply, "and not at all to Tom. It was of him that we were speaking."

She ignored this broad hint.

"It *does* matter," she said gravely. "It matters a great deal to every man, however independent and . . . and unselfish he may be."

"Then you did not believe it?" he inquired, rashly.

"It . . . ?" she echoed, interrogatively.

"What you heard," he explained.

She reflected for some moments, recalling all that had passed between them on this subject. Then she turned her head towards him with a pretty little inquisitorial air, keeping her eyes, however, fixed upon the carpet.

"How do you know that I have heard anything?"

"I foresaw that you would. Certain gossip had, I found some time ago, got into a channel which would ultimately lead it to you."

"And you made no attempt to stop it?"

"No—that would have made matters worse."

She studied the flowers painted on her fan with critical interest for a moment, and without ceasing her contemplation said, in an even, measured way—

"It may be of some small interest to you to learn that I believed—nothing."

"Thank you."

"Tell me," she said presently, as if reading the words upon the painted silk; "tell me—that is, if you wish to—who was the person who suddenly impressed upon you the fact that you were more or less responsible for Tom?"

"Syra."

A little nod, almost imperceptible, betrayed to Crozier that his companion's suspicions had been confirmed.

"I do not understand Syra."

“I do not imagine that Syra understands herself,” he replied, guardedly.

She half turned her head towards him, and her lips were ready parted with a question, when she seemed to recollect herself, and with an unconscious assumption of maidenly dignity she closed her fan slowly and carefully.

“I wish,” she exclaimed, with a little sigh, “that Tom would assume the responsibilities of human life. I am sure that he is very clever. He could be a great artist if only he set his heart upon it. There is nothing so discouraging and so sad as to see people miss success; to see it within their grasp, and yet to see them fail for some reason, for the lack of some little requisite.”

There was a great movement upon the stairs and in the hall beneath them. The next waltz had begun.

“That,” he said with a deprecating smile, as he stood up and offered her his arm, “is life—to see success just in front and never to reach it.”



CHAPTER VII.

THE RECKONING UP.

HOLDSWORTH and Crozier met at the foot of the stairs when the schottische—number seventeen upon the programme—was fairly started. For a moment they stood there—two sturdy, typical Englishmen. One fair, blue-eyed and merry; the other darker, with crisp curled hair, and thoughtful, deep-set eyes of an observant habit; both straight and upright, with ready hands, and a peculiar intrepid carriage of the head.

“My dance, I believe,” said Holdsworth, audaciously.

Crozier nodded his head with a faint smile, and looked round him slowly. They were practically alone in that house full of people,

the stairs being only used for a resting-place during the crush between the dances.

"Let us sit down," said the singer, indicating the bottom step.

And so they sat there with elevated knees held apart, and clasped hands between, in a similarity of pose which was remarkable.

Beneath his lowered lashes Holdsworth glanced furtively at his companion, waiting.

"I have news for you, Holdsworth," said the singer, after a moment.

The sailor clasped his broad hand round his beard, making the golden hair rustle.

"Something disagreeable, I bet," he said, with assumed indifference.

"I do not know . . . whether it will prove disagreeable or not. It is the news of a death."

"A death!" echoed Holdsworth. "Emily Harland?" he added interrogatively, after a pause.

"Yes."

Holdsworth remained silent for some moments. Then he heaved a sigh—the easy light sigh of an utterly selfish man.

"She always was delicate," he remarked in a resigned spirit, which was almost ludicrous.

Crozier turned deliberately and looked at him as one looks at a curious and rare insect.

"She died of consumption," he said.'

"Yes," answered the other in the same cool way, "it was in the family."

Crozier rose from his seat. He did not even take the trouble to show his disgust.

"That is my news," he said, curtly. He was about to move away when he looked down at his companion, and their eyes met. Then he stayed. Holdsworth's face was haggard. It was no longer the face of a reckless ne'er-do-weel, devoid of scruple, free from remorse. In a moment the features had changed. He who sat there and looked up into Crozier's strong, peaceful face was a hunted man, with haggard, scared, weary eyes, the victim of persistent ill-fortune. The singer had a strong man's true softness of heart. He had seen that look on the sailor's face before, and had never yet turned away from it. He now stood at the foot of the stairs with his hand upon

the oak balustrade—simply stood there and said nothing; but his presence had a comforting sense of sympathy and reliability such as draws us to certain persons in time of trouble.

The gay, rattling music rang in their ears; beneath their feet the floor vibrated incessantly.

At last Holdsworth spoke in a low, unsteady voice.

“When you first told me that you had . . . helped her,” he said, “I was jealous of you. I don’t believe I even said thank you. Or perhaps you would not let me do so.”

The last words were uttered with a faint bitterness, but Crozier showed no sign of having heard them.

“I am not going to say it now. You need not go away,” continued the sailor, “I know better than to offer thanks to you. But I want to reckon up with you.”

He took his programme from his pocket and laid it upon his knee. Then he tore the pencil away from the card and began writing. In the dim light of the shaded lamp, at the foot of the broad old staircase, a strange transaction took

place while the jerky schottische music rang through the house.

“Five years and six months,” said Holdsworth, slowly writing as he spoke. “That is five years and a half at—what? What did you allow her?”

“Seventy pounds a year,” answered Crozier, betraying no surprise.

“Three hundred and fifty—three hundred and eighty-five pounds,” calculated the sailor aloud. “I shall pay you that, Crozier, some day.”

He tore the dainty little card in two and looked up, programme-pencil in hand.

“Will you take an I O U?”

“No.”

Holdsworth did not press the point. He looked at the pencil figures again, to make sure that there was no mistake, and returned the two pieces of polished pasteboard to his waistcoat-pocket.

“Three hundred and eighty-five pounds,” he repeated in a business-like manner; “I shall not forget the amount.”

It was the price of a ruined human existence—not much after all, and probably more than it

was worth; but he did not seem to think of that.

"Three hundred and eighty-five pounds," confirmed the singer.

Holdsworth stood up, but neither moved away.

"I suppose you will let me pay it," he said, defiantly.

"Oh yes," replied the possessor of an annual income of over three thousand pounds, "I will let you pay it."

This was justice indeed. The affair was thus arranged; the last apparent obligation put into a fair way of settlement, and there seemed to be nothing more to say. Crozier made a little movement towards the dancing-room, but the sailor detained him by a slight jerk of the head.

"In case," he said, with simulated cynicism (his eyes were dull with anguish while he spoke) — "in case there is any misconception in your mind as to past events, I may as well tell you that I alone was to blame. I alone was the cause of Emily Harland's leaving her home and going . . . to the bad."

"Yes; I suppose so"—with a certain cool

cruelty which was most certainly founded upon the past, for it was totally unlike Samuel Crozier.

"Yes," continued the sailor, reflectively, "I suppose you know that I ruined her. But, Crozier, I did not do it deliberately, remember that. I was led away . . . perhaps she was a little bit to blame. I am such a beastly impulsive fellow, you know, and act on the spur of the moment, leaving regret till afterwards."

"Well," said Crozier, "I wouldn't think too much about it now. It is finished and done with, and there is no good to be got out of attempting to fix the blame upon any one in particular."

Holdsworth stood in front of the singer, leaning against the wall. He was watching his face speculatively.

"I wonder," he said presently, "if you did right in keeping us apart. It was a great responsibility, Crozier."

"Yes," was the answer, "it was. But there is nothing so despicable on earth as the man who tries to get through life without incurring

responsibility. Despite what has happened, I still think that you were better apart."

"You mean that she was better apart from me."

The implacable Crozier nodded his head in acquiescence. It was an unfortunate fact that Holdsworth divined his former officer's thoughts concerning himself with remarkable accuracy, and Crozier was too straightforward a man to deny them.

"I wish, Crozier," continued the sailor, "that I could understand you a little better. I wish I could understand why you have done all that you have done and tried for me." He took the half-programme from his pocket and glanced at the pencil figures, hard and black upon the polished surface of the card. "I don't think," he continued, "that it ought to finish up with this!"

He held out the card so that the figures were visible to his companion.

"On the contrary," said Crozier, coolly, "I do not see what better ending could come about. It is a settlement in full, is it not?"

Holdsworth shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"No," he said, curtly, "it is not."

"I think we had better consider it so," said Crozier, moving away. The music had ceased, and the dancers were already crowding out of the hot room into the passage.

Holdsworth followed, and they walked side by side down the broad corridor towards a group of mutual acquaintances.

"By God, Crozier," whispered the sailor, with an incredulous wonder in his voice, "you are a hard man!"

The singer turned towards him with a faint, almost apologetic smile.

"I'm afraid you are right," he said. And they joined the merry party, where Tom Valliant and the squire were laughing at each other.





CHAPTER VIII.

FOREWARNED.

DESPITE Crozier's tirades against the degeneration of musical taste, he gathered a certain amount of enjoyment from the first nights at which his appearance was necessary. He had undertaken the musical criticism of a London weekly paper and two provincial journals because their editors had asked him to do so, and at a time when the monthly cheque for "literary contributions" was welcome. Now in his affluence he intended to continue it for its own sake. The love of criticizing is deeply planted in every man's soul, and Crozier wrote in a deliberate and straightforward style, which not only carried weight with it, but conveyed a sense of earnestness and an unusual freedom from personal

consideration or bias of any description. About the "*operas - bouffes*" and "*operas - comiques*," which at certain intervals carry all better musical taste before them, he wrote curtly and descriptively, but not with open criticism. Public opinion was against him, and he had neither the power nor the energy to attempt its education into better channels. It was after all a mere matter of taste. The British public liked its music thin and tawdry, served up with a great show of tinsel, and a still greater display of shapely limbs. "*Soit !*" It was no affair of Samuel Crozier's.

To Syra he grumbled occasionally in a semi-bantering way—to a mere barmaid ! It is to be feared, however, that this singer and critic was hopelessly Bohemian in those days. He even treated her as if she were a woman, with a woman's instinctive good taste ; sometimes he actually went so outrageously far as to treat her and speak to her as if she were a lady.

It was with some feeling of pleasant anticipation, therefore, that he called a cab one evening in March and drove to a new

theatre in the West End. The excitement in dramatic and artistic circles anent this new venture had been intense for some time. The building itself was as gorgeous as masonry without and gold-leaf within could well make it, and of course its stage was constructed with a strict regard to the contingencies of comic opera. The house was to be warmed by an entertainment of this description, got up with a due regard to cheap tunefulness and the newest slang.

At the side of the stalls there was a kind of lounge, or drawing-room, where the occupants of those luxurious seats could retire between the acts to stand about and meet their friends without being actually compelled to leave the theatre. It was here that Crozier, on entering, met several acquaintances and friends. These men were mostly brother-critics, and they returned later to the same spot to discuss their verdict upon the performance.

The news of Sam Crozier's good fortune was still fresh, and he was sufficiently a favourite to call down real and hearty congratulations from all who knew him.

“Here comes Crœsus!” said one man, gravely — the correspondent of a comic American journal.

“So he is,” said another, who wrote musical criticism for a religious publication, and had, strictly speaking, no business in the theatre at all. “Let us try and borrow money from him—eh, Sam? I suppose all your friends are doing that now.”

“Trying . . . Yes!” answered Crozier, as he shook hands all round with his vague, genial smile.

“I congratulate you, Crozier,” said a melancholy-looking man, who wore spectacles, coming forward with a thin delicate hand outstretched. “I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. I suppose now I may look forward to being appointed musical and dramatic critic to the *Daily Intelligence*, which is the aim of my life. For years I have waited and prayed for your death. I have hung about concert-halls in order to watch you take your high notes, and I have even consulted eminent medical men as to whether they have ever heard of a brute, with a constitution like a camel, breaking a

blood-vessel on F sharp ! This, however, does as well, so we will say nothing more about the weary years of waiting."

Some of the listeners joined in Crozier's easy laugh, and most of them smiled, but the man who had spoken never changed countenance. He looked gravely round him through his large spectacles, and walked away to greet a friend. He rarely spoke seriously—this eccentric genius—but he never smiled.

At this moment the orchestra struck up a lively introduction, and there was a general move. The critics were placed within reach of each other, and some of them composed themselves to quiet slumber at once, while the younger members of the fraternity fumbled for their pencils, with just sufficient ostentation to call the attention of any lady who happened to be looking in their direction.

Crozier, who was without pencil or note-book, gave his usual placidly earnest attention to the music. He had a singular habit of looking straight in front of him in a theatre, which arose doubtless from the fact that his face was well

known among frequenters of first nights and lovers of music. If he looked round, the action entailed greeting acquaintances who interested him little, or it would be received by nudges and suppressed whispers which in no way gratified him, flattering though it might be.

During the first act he scarcely removed his eyes from the stage, and at the end of it he entered into a deep discussion with a friend occupying the next stall, who advocated comic opera as being within the understanding of the people. He therefore had as yet scarcely looked round the theatre. While the understanding of the people was still in dispute, a young man made his way along between the knees of grumbling old gentlemen and stonily-staring dowagers, with a view of occupying the seat on Crozier's left hand, which was empty. This individual was he who had first addressed the singer on his entrance.

He took the vacant chair, and presently raised his glasses to his eyes. The glasses were directed towards a box somewhat high up upon the right of the stage, much to the contentment of a

be-diamonded lady occupying the same ; but the critic's eyes, instead of looking through the lenses, were directed in the shadow of his hand to the "lounge" where he had first met Crozier. There were many gentlemen standing there with due solemnity and appreciation of their own shirt-fronts, and a few ladies examining the decorations.

"Sam," said the young fellow, without lowering his binoculars, "what have you been up to?"

Crozier accorded him his attention with an anticipatory smile. Despite a certain ring of gravity in the speaker's tone, he could only conclude that the comprehensive question was the beginning of a joke.

"What have I been up to?" he repeated. "Let me see. Nothing criminal within the last week, I think."

The young fellow laid his opera-glasses on his knees, and turned sideways in his seat, crossing his legs and leaning his arm upon the cushioned back of the stall,

"Of course," he said, "it is no business of mine ; but I happened to be looking round the

place just now, and I saw two fellows standing in the gangway behind the upper boxes. There was nothing at all noticeable in them beyond the fact that they were looking at you ; in fact one of them was pointing you out to the other. I watched them, and there was something sneaky and disagreeable in their movements which I didn't like at all. Don't look in that direction just yet ; but they are now standing in the little 'salon' place, where we all met to-night."

Crozier scratched his strong chin thoughtfully with one finger.

"It is a funny business," he said ; "I don't remember committing any crime lately. I expect they're secretaries of charity organization societies, who have been reading the *Illustrated London News*, and want to fix me for an annual subscription or so."

The correspondent of the theological paper was not by any means a serious young man, but he took this incident very gravely.

"It is no joke," he said, "to be taken for some one else in some cases. Of course there are plenty of us here to-night to prove your

identity ; but I have a wholesome dread of the law."

At this moment the curtain rose, and Crozier took the opportunity of glancing towards the spot indicated by his companion. The two men were certainly there, standing modestly in a dark corner, but rendered conspicuous by their rough top-coats amidst the black-clad pleasure-seekers.

"I admire the police very much," he said pleasantly to his companion as he settled himself to face the stage, "in the abstract."

At the end of the act he leant forward to seek his hat beneath the seat.

"What are you going to do?" asked his companion.

"I am going out—at least, I am going to the foyer. These fellows will finish by making me conspicuous, which for a man of my shy and retiring nature is a painful prospect."

The young journalist did not seem to take the matter in quite such a placid spirit.

"What!—are you going to speak to them?" he asked.

"No ; but I am going to stand quite close to them. They would like a good look at me, I am sure."

"Well, don't let us have a scene."

Crozier laughed reassuringly.

"I have never taken even a minor part in a scene yet. This is hardly the place to make a *début*," he said. "Come along and stand near me ; we will talk weather while they walk round us and take notes. Privately, Soames, I believe it is you they are after."

And he rose. In every detail he carried out his threat, even to discussing the weather.

The two men bore it for some moments in silence, then one made a step forward, and without touching Crozier, stood beside him. Soames, the newspaper correspondent, was in front of him, looking up from his inferior height into the singer's face.

"George Shenstone," said the man, in a clear undertone ; "George Shenstone, unless I'm mistaken."

Crozier's finger and thumb had been resting in his waistcoat-pocket, and he now withdrew

them from it with a card which he handed unostentatiously to the detective. It was all done so quietly and indifferently by both men, that no one who did not actually hear their words would have thought that any communication had passed between them; but Soames noticed that at the mention of the words "George Shenstone," an expression of mingled surprise and anxiety passed across the singer's face.

"No, I am not George Shenstone," he replied, as he gave the card. "That is my name, and there are twenty men within call who will vouch for it."

The man glanced at the card, and gave it back immediately.

"I *thought* we were on the wrong track," he said, apologetically. "I ought to have remembered your face before. There is a photograph of you in a music-publisher's shop in Oxford Street."

"Indeed."

"I must apologize," continued the detective, simply; "it was very clumsy of me."

"Not at all," answered Crozier, in a constrained tone, which was unlike him.

The detective glanced in a keenly questioning manner at his impassive face, and then moved away quietly without saying anything more. He called his companion with a mere movement of the eyebrows, and they passed out of the auditorium together.

Crozier did not move until the swinging-door had closed behind them.

"Soames," he said, "don't say anything about this. I believe I know something of the fellow they are after—a poor devil of a blue-jacket, who got sick of the sea before his time was up, and deserted. Not much of a crime in times of peace."

"All right!" answered the journalist; "I will keep quiet."

And it is worth noting that he did so.

Then they got separated, and Crozier presently went back to the stalls. He did not, however, return to his own, but occupied for a few minutes a vacant chair next the melancholy gentleman who so openly coveted his post on the staff of the *Daily Intelligence*.

"I say, Watson," he said, when he was seated, "have you got a telegram-form?"

“Never am without one, my friend,” replied the old stager.

After a short search he handed Crozier the required paper, and discreetly looked the other way while the singer wrote.

The gist of the message was hardly calculated to be read, however, at once by a casual observer with much edification.

“I was to-day mistaken for a seaman, late *Willow-wren*, who is wanted.—S. C.”

This ambiguous and pointless news was addressed to William Holdsworth, Heath End, Goldheath; and a few minutes after it was written a commissionaire hurried to the General Post Office from whence it was despatched.

In the mean time the play was progressing happily enough, and the critics were beginning to yawn. At the end of the third act these gentlemen met in the open space at the side of the stalls and talked over their verdict, after which it is a painful duty to record that some of them went home.

Crozier, however, stayed to the end, as was his wont. When at length the curtain fell he passed

out of the theatre alone, and at the door found the detective who had spoken to him earlier in the evening. There was no sign of his companion.

The man dropped alongside of him when he had penetrated through the crowd and fell into step.

"Excuse me, Mr. Crozier," he said, "excuse me troubling you again, but we have to suppress our own inclinations very often in my profession, and I can assure you that it is quite against my will."

The singer laughed as he lighted his cigar.

"Oh," he answered, "pray don't apologize. I suppose it is the duty of every honest citizen to assist the cause of justice."

The disciple of justice did not exactly seize with avidity upon this theory. He contented himself with murmuring something to the effect that the general impression was of that nature.

"I have just recollected, sir," he continued in a business-like tone, "that you were once in Her Majesty's Navy—did you ever serve on board the *Willow-wren*?"

The question, asked with a certain doubtfulness

as if the event were very unlikely, might have disconcerted any one totally unprepared for it.

“Yes,” answered Crozier, quite naturally, “I served seven years on board of her.”

“Then this man Shenstone would be on board at the same time as you.”

The singer turned slowly and deliberately. The man, who was slightly above him in height, was looking at him, and their eyes met.

“Indeed,” said the singer, with an expression on his quiet face which can only be described as dense.

“Yes,” remarked the man vaguely, “I believe he would.” He could not make out that density, and something in the ex-officer’s manner made him feel uncomfortable, as if he were prying into the affairs of a gentleman with whom he had no business.

“Well,” he added with some hesitation, after they had walked a short distance in silence, “I can only apologize again, sir, for having troubled you.”

“Not at all,” said Crozier, looking straight in front of him.

“Good night, sir.”

“Good night.”

The detective dropped behind and presently crossed the road, while Crozier walked on smoking restfully.

“Got rid of him,” he murmured between the puffs with a certain satisfaction.

As he walked on through the crowd, beneath the brilliant lamps, amidst the roar and hubbub of midnight life in the Strand, he reflected as quietly and collectedly as if he had been alone in some deserted country lane, or keeping the middle watch on board the *Willow-wren*.

This power of self-absorption was no special possession of his. It is a growth of the pavement—that stony place where many vices and few virtues flourish—and we others, we men who trot the pavement, soon acquire it. We soon learn to pass by Vice and touch elbows with it, unheeding, uncontaminated, and probably unmoved by pity. But Virtue, alas ! we also gaze at vaguely and admire it not, scarcely taking the trouble to distinguish it. Neither have the power

of affecting our inward thoughts, of touching that individuality which, although hidden in city-folks (who sooner or later find the necessity of passing through existence with the crowd, acting as the crowd has acted), is there as strongly as in country-bred people who show their eccentricities to all the world. It is assuredly a special foresight of Providence, in view of overcrowded cities, that, if a man only have the goal in sight, he can steer as straight a course for it amidst a seething hive of vicious humanity as in a fair and virtuous hamlet.

Samuel Crozier never thought much in an abstract fashion of the course that he was steering. Indeed he rarely gave himself time to think at all—never sat idly smoking over a smouldering fire—never dreamt day-dreams over a closed book. When not actually and actively employed he was reading, and there were few men in London with a wider knowledge of general literature. When his hands alone were employed he sang in an undertone to himself. With no fuss or busy show he led an active life. Of course he might have made it a more

profitable one, but . . . you and I . . . what of ours ? What of all the thousand lives around us of which we know something and guess at more ? He might have worked harder at his adopted profession—might have made more of the great gift (one of the greatest vouchsafed to men) that God had placed within his lips ; but who among us *does* make the best of his opportunities ? If we did so invariably, human life would not be human life at all, and the lord of creation would not be the one unfinished, unsatisfactory bungle in an otherwise perfect work.

As he walked home from the theatre, and after a little sigh of relief directed towards the departing detective, Crozier allowed himself to reflect—not upon Wrong and Right and such things—but upon his own recent action as regarded William Holdsworth. Of course he had done wrong ; there could be no doubt about that ; but he smoked serenely, and to judge from the expression of his face, was fully prepared to go on doing wrong. Such indeed was the case. He had warned the run-away sailor, and if further aid was needed, he was in an

indefinite way prepared to render it—not from friendship towards the unsatisfactory fellow, but because there existed between them the mystic tie of a mutual affection. One name there was in either heart enshrined in the halo of an old association — the name of *Willow-wren*, — and for the sake of that name an upright man willingly frustrated the cause of justice, and rendered a great service to a shipmate, who would never possess the means, nor be actuated by the desire, to return it. While he reflected, there arose before his mind's eye the upright form of a genial, white-haired old sailor—his former chief—a man whose heart and soul were wrapped up in the *Willow-wren*, and who boasted in a harmless lovable way that her good name had never been dragged through court-martial or newspaper trial.

“Yes,” muttered the ex-officer, “Holdsworth must get away, for the sake of the old ship.”



CHAPTER IX.

FOR THE SHIP'S SAKE.

IT happened that Crozier reached his rooms rather earlier than usual in the evening following the theatre episode. He had been out several nights in succession, and was tired; but the fatal habit of keeping late hours was strong upon him, and at eleven o'clock he took a book, lighted his pipe, and established himself in his deep arm-chair to enjoy a quiet hour.

Hardly was he seated when a light footstep beneath his window caused him to look up. The sound of it in some way suggested flight. It seemed as if some one had fled to Lime Court, and, having no knowledge of the locality, was now standing beneath the window with the double purpose of ascertaining whether the pur-

suer were still following, and of observing the possible exits in case of necessity.

The very lightness of the step attracted Crozier's attention. The ordinary malefactor is not light-footed. A chase down the darker streets and alleys leading from the Strand is of nightly occurrence, but he who leads it rarely runs lightly. He is generally a pickpocket, with shocking bad boots several sizes too large for him. The scientific burglar is a heavy-footed man, but he counteracts this natural defect by a pair of list slippers, which make no sound at all. Lightness of tread is a thing that cannot be acquired; we inherit it from gentle ancestor, or we walk heavily. He whose father or grandfather once wore hob-nailed boots will walk as if those excellent pedal protectors were bound to his own ankles, and only a few generations shod in thinner leather will eradicate the peculiarity. Without thinking much of these things in a general way, the singer allowed his attention to wander from his book, and he sat listening in a semi-indifferent way for the next movement of those light feet.

Suddenly there arose in the silence a sound which made the placid singer jump to his feet, and throw his book upon the table without staying to mark the place. This sound was a whistle, low and melodious without being actually furtive. It might have been the call of one boy to another in a game of hide-and-seek, a pastime much in vogue among the youths of the neighbourhood, and to which the intricacies of the Temple lent additional charms. Only a naval man would have recognized that the whistle was the boatswain's call of "all hands on deck."

While Crozier stood listening the call was repeated.

"Holdsworth!" he muttered. "What a fool! What an insane fool!"

Then he ran lightly down-stairs and opened the door. In the shadow of the lime tree, which was weakly budding, stood a man looking round him apprehensively.

"Come in!" said Crozier briefly.

The man came forward, ran lightly up the steps and passed into the dimly-lighted passage.

He was breathless, and his weak mouth twitched convulsively.

"I did not know your number," he gasped, "but I knew it was Lime Court!"

Crozier nodded his head and led the way silently up-stairs. When they were in the room and the door was closed, he spoke at length, and there was a suggestion of tolerance in his voice which his companion's quick ears did not fail to catch.

"What a fool you are, Holdsworth!" he said.

"That's it," exclaimed the other petulantly. "Hit a man when he is down; stoop from the heights of virtue, and shove a chap down the hill. But I have no time, Crozier, to listen if you are going to abuse me, which I suppose you have a right to do. I'm in a beastly narrow place, and somehow I've come to you. It isn't the first time, God knows!"

"No," agreed Crozier; "it isn't the first time. But surely any one with a scrap of sense would have known that it was simple foolery to come to London after my telegram."

"Your telegram," repeated the other; "what do you mean?"

"I telegraphed to you last night."

"At Goldheath?"

"Yes."

"I have been in London three days."

"Ah," said Crozier, in a softer tone, "that is a different matter. I beg your pardon. My warning missed fire."

At this moment some one walked sharply past beneath the window. Holdsworth, who had in a great degree regained his composure, changed colour.

"Listen!" he whispered; "who is that?"

Then, for the first time, they looked into each other's faces. In Holdsworth's eyes there was an unpleasant glitter, which by some strange influence was transmitted to Crozier's. The singer's thoughtful face was quite transformed by it, and the change was hardly pleasant. These two men had been in action together, actually fighting side by side. Mere affairs of a boat's crew these had been, in connection with the suppression of Chinese piracy, but where a

man's life is concerned it matters little whether the battle be a Waterloo or a skirmish. In those few moments both recalled the half-forgotten dangers they had shared in bygone days, and perhaps Holdsworth benefited by the recollection. The footsteps died away, and both heaved a little sigh of relief.

"There is no time to lose," said Holdsworth, hurriedly; "listen to this. Yesterday morning I was walking along a quiet street near Victoria Station, when who should I meet, face to face, but Jerome? You remember him; he was a middy in your time, and the greatest fool on board. He recognized me at once, though I did not give him credit for so much sense; stopped and held out his stick so that I could not pass. 'George Shenstone—A. B.,' he drawled, in that confoundedly squeaky voice which used to be nowhere in a breeze of wind. 'George Shenstone, I think you're wanted.' I wasn't going to be taken by a weak-kneed dandy like Jerome, who is no more a sailor than those sugar-tongs (yes, thanks, I will have a little cold water), so I let out. I did not hit him in

the face ; only on the chest ; but I think I hit hard ; then I sheered off."

Crozier took up an evening paper which lay upon the table.

"Yes," he said slowly, "you must have hit hard, for you broke two of his ribs. There is an account of it here. Luckily for you, Jerome was too much injured to make his deposition, or give a minute description of his assailant. They fear some internal complication. There it is ; you had better read it."

Holdsworth took the newspaper and read the short notice through once or twice.

"Just like my luck," he exclaimed, recklessly. "But he will be all right, never fear ; I didn't hit him hard. Besides, he must have recovered sufficiently to give particulars, because I was tracked to Myra's to-night. I went in there with Varden. Soon afterwards two fellows came in and asked for a drink. That pretty girl there—Syra—served them in an off-hand way, and I saw the fellows glance uncomfortably around, as if they felt a little out of their element. It appears that all the frequenters of Myra's know

each other more or less, and these two outsiders were promptly recognized as such. When they had left, the question arose as to who and what they were; and one fellow laughingly suggested that they might be detectives. I laughed with the rest, but I knew that he was right. I can tell you, Crozier, it took me some time to make up my mind to go out of that door. When I did go out—hanging on to Varden's arm like a sailor's sweetheart—I looked up and down the Street; and in a doorway higher up the hill I spotted the two men. We walked along as far as Charing Cross, and I suppose they followed us all the way. I only dared to turn my head once, and then I saw them some way behind. At Charing Cross Varden took a hansom. I got round the corner, and made a bolt down Craven Street, through that tunnel under the railway station, and back into the Strand by the darkest streets I could find. I have given them the slip, but there is no time to be lost. What am I to do, Crozier? Tell me, for the sake of old times."

"Oh," said the singer, "it is all right. I'll help you, but not for the sake of old times,

Holdsworth. I'll do it for the sake of the ship. We don't want *her* name dragged through the police-courts. These two men came to me last night at the theatre. They mistook me for you, and as soon as they were persuaded to the contrary I wired to you at Goldheath to be on the look-out, taking it for granted that you would lie low there until the affair blew over. Of course I did not know of this business of Jerome's. I thought it was only the old question of the unexpired service. Afterwards they came back to me, apologized, and said that they had discovered that I had been an officer on board the *Willow-wren*, and told me that they were seeking for you."

Holdsworth's confidence was returning. This was undoubtedly the result of his companion's cool readiness to assist him. He knew that Crozier would carry out anything he undertook.

"And now," continued the singer, "you must get back to Goldheath. That is the safest place for you. Every outlet from the kingdom is watched, and a sailor cannot disguise himself when he smells tar. They would spot you by the very

way you walked down the gangway to the boat. You had better stay here to-night, and go down by the first train to-morrow morning."

"Hush!" interrupted Holdsworth. "What is that?"

There was no mistaking the official tread; and, moreover, other footsteps accompanied it. Holdsworth reached out his hand towards the gas, but his companion motioned him to leave it.

"It is all right," he whispered. "The curtains are thick; they cannot see that the gas is alight."

"Then turn it out and look through the corner of the window," said Holdsworth.

Crozier obeyed him, and moved cautiously across the dark room towards the window.

"There is a light down-stairs in the passage," Holdsworth whispered hoarsely.

"So there is in every passage in the court," replied Crozier, as he cautiously drew back the curtain. "We are a dissipated lot! Yes," he continued, "there they are—two fellows in plain clothes and a bobby."

"Well then, I'm caught."

"Not yet. They have traced you as far as here, by some means or other, but they must be off the scent now. There is no place in London like the Temple for leading people astray, especially at night, when some of the passages are barred, and others left open."

The murmur of suppressed voices reached the ears of the two men as they stood in the dark room, hardly breathing. Then Crozier closed the curtain cautiously, and lighted the gas, taking, however, the precaution of keeping it low.

"You cannot stay here, Holdsworth," he said. "As soon as these fellows move you must make a bolt for it."

"I think," said the other deliberately, "that I will go out and give myself up. It is not worth getting you into a row."

Nevertheless he stood still beside the table, and showed no sign of moving.

"Rot!" murmured Crozier, sweetly. He knew William Holdsworth very well, and rightly judged that the argument would go no further.

“Listen to me,” he continued in a business-like way. “As soon as these fellows move we will go out together. I have an old ulster which you can wear, and you may as well take one of my hats. We will go out arm-in-arm, and simply brazen it out. If the fellows see through it, make a fight for it and run; I will make a fight, and let them collar me. It is very dark all about here, and they will not be able to tell one from the other. Now pay great attention to this—wait, I will draw you a chart, because it is complicated. There are four outlets from Lime Court. This is the one you must take. It divides about ten yards down. The alley to the right is the one you must follow, but don’t go straight ahead; turn sharp to the right as soon as you get into it. It looks almost like a doorway, but it is really a passage, which curves round and takes you into a narrow street near the embankment. Go across Blackfriars Bridge, make your way along Southwark Street, and get into London Bridge Station just in time to miss the last train to somewhere or other, it does not much matter where. Then go to the Bridge

House Hotel to sleep, and take care to let everybody know that you have missed the last train, which will account for the absence of luggage. Go down to Goldheath by the first train to-morrow morning. Do you understand?"

Holdsworth studied the roughly-drawn chart for a moment.

"Yes," he said, eagerly, "I understand; and by God, Crozier, if I get out of this I'll . . ."

"All right," interrupted Crozier, almost roughly, "I know all about that."

Holdsworth shrugged his shoulders, and laughed bitterly.

"I see you have not changed," he said. "There is a suspicion of the quarter-deck about you still."

But Crozier was not listening. He had passed through the curtained doorway into his bedroom, and presently he returned carrying a large coat and a hat.

"Here you are," he said. "Put that ulster on, and the hat. Nothing changes a man's appearance so much as another fellow's hat. I will wear yours," he continued, after a pause,

"especially as I notice that it is a superior article to my own."

In a few moments Holdsworth was ready. His companion slipped on a top-coat, and then turned out the gas. He approached the window, and drew aside the curtain.

"They have gone," he said. "No doubt they have dispersed to watch the exits, which is all the better. Turn up the gas, and let me have a look at you."

A short survey apparently satisfied him.

"Yes," he said, "you will do splendidly. And now cigars, and then we will be complete. Cigars and a swagger."

He handed the box towards Holdsworth across the table and helped himself. He struck a match, and lighted up before handing the match to his companion. Instead of taking it, Holdsworth leant forward with the cigar between his lips; and had either man been in the least nervous it would have been impossible to hide a slight tremble of hand or lip. But cigar and match were alike steady, and the tobacco glowed. Then Holdsworth looked up, and their eyes met.

Both were smiling, as if they took a youthful pleasure in seeking danger for its own sake. That passing smile illuminated by a flickering wax match, framed in a halo of cigar smoke, was the recollection that each carried of the other through the rest of his life, for they never looked into each other's face again. Crozier threw the match into the fireplace, and led the way towards the door.

"By the way," he said on the stairs, "have you enough money?"

"Yes, thanks," was the reply. "Fortunately I got a cheque cashed yesterday, so I need not borrow anything from you. I owe you a good deal, Crozier, that I can never pay, but if some day you get a cheque for three hundred and eighty-five pounds, pay it into your bank, and remember that the remainder of my debt is not quite forgotten."

Holdsworth was under the warming influence of real honest gratitude, and it was rather annoying not to be able to express it. He did not dare to do more than hint at it in this way, and the singer gave him no encouragement. His

faith in Holdsworth's gratitude was dead, and it could never now be revived.

"Five years and a half," continued the fugitive, "at seventy, is three hundred and eighty-five pounds. Some day I will pay you!"

"Better leave it as it is!" grumbled Crozier. His hand was on the latch, and turning, he looked sharply at his companion. "Are you ready?" he inquired. "As soon as we are outside take my arm, and try to walk differently from yourself; put on a swagger, and hang your head. Don't let them see that you've been drilled."

Then he opened the door, and they passed out. It was a clear dark night with no moon. In the open country the reflection of the stars might have illuminated the earth to some small extent, but in the narrow passages and courts of the Temple the darkness was profound. With linked arms they went down the steps together, and crossed the court. There was a man standing idly at the exit by which they intended to pass. He appeared to be searching for a match wherewith to light his pipe. As they passed

the lime tree, Holdsworth committed a slight error by falling into step in a practised manner with his companion.

The man struck a match at the precise moment when they passed him, and guarding it within his half-closed hands, managed very cleverly to throw the light upon their faces, while apparently having no other intention than that of lighting his pipe. Holdsworth, however, who was nearest to him, frustrated his design by deliberately shielding his eyes with his hand as if the light dazzled him.

"It's confoundedly dark," he said, at the same time.

Crozier assented airily, and they passed on; but glancing back over his shoulder he saw the man run across the court, doubtless with the intention of calling a companion.

"Run!" whispered the singer. "Run for it!"

Side by side they sped through the narrow passages, and presently emerged into a deserted street.

"Now," said Crozier, somewhat breathlessly,

“we must walk a little. There are often policemen about here, and we must not attract attention.”

Soon after he broke into a run again, and guided his companion through a maze of narrow and dirty streets. Occasionally they passed a house that was lighted up, and from which the throb of an engine suggested printing, which is essentially a nocturnal industry in these hurried times, but most of the buildings upon either side of them were dark and deserted.

At length they arrived in a broad thoroughfare through which a scanty traffic straggled.

“Here you are!” said Crozier. “Take a hansom to London Bridge. I go this way. We must not be seen together. Good-bye!”

He turned to go at once, without waiting for thanks, without taking his hand from his pocket; but Holdsworth followed him.

“Good-bye, Crozier,” he said, in a painfully concentrated voice, as he held his hand out so that it was impossible to ignore it.

The singer shook hands quite simply and naturally.

“Good-bye,” he repeated. “There is a hansom at the other side of the road.”

And he turned his back and walked away firmly. Presently he turned into Fleet Street, and through the more crowded thoroughfare placidly made his way. Around him was vice enough, and misery more than enough. The very incarnation of both touched him on either side, brushing past or cringing after, but he heeded them not. This darker side of humanity was no new thing to Samuel Crozier, and perhaps he was after all a hard-hearted man. I cannot judge him. He hummed a tune to himself under his breath, and disregarded the story of the woman at his elbow who had not eaten a bite o’ bread for four days. Yet he had risked his good name, disregarded his obvious duty as a late officer in her Majesty’s service, and openly connived at the breaking of the law in order to lighten one of these burthens; for the line of distinction between Holdsworth who drove away in a hansom, and the felon who sneaked back to his particular doorway clutching the penny he had earned by shutting the

cab-door was less marked than the former thought.

Crozier seemed to be quite unconscious of having wrought a little good, of having lifted for a time at least the weight of misfortune that crushed one life, out of the thousands upon which the merry stars twinkled blithely that night—lives which no optimist would dare to consider worth the living. There was no smile of conscious virtue on his face, no warmth of benevolence in his heart. He merely walked on, unobservant and indifferent, content and aimless, while the half-drunken woman with the piteous tale of starvation cursed him obscenely for his hardness.





CHAPTER X.

IMPULSE.

SO William Holdsworth escaped the clutches of the law. Early on the following morning he went down to Goldheath minus baggage, for which he wrote later. He walked home across the heath, full of confidence, and blithe as the birds in spring, for his heart was a poor receptacle—care never nestled there long. His plans were not yet formed, but he felt in a vague way that England would not hold him. The escape of the previous evening, the excitement of those few minutes in Crozier's rooms, followed by the chase through the narrow streets, perhaps also the old associations awakened by the sight of Crozier, old memories of adventure

recalled by the singer's voice, cool and steady as it always was in time of peril, awakened within him the semi-dormant spirit of restlessness.

This spirit was upon him now as he hurried through the keen morning air. But also the influence of Samuel Crozier was with him still ; the only influence that had ever remained with him for an appreciable space of time ; an influence exercised by no other man hitherto.

The run-away sailor was grateful, and he imagined that his gratitude was called forth only by the service rendered to him ten hours before ; but it was not so. The debt he acknowledged was that of a life-time ; the influence that subjugated him had not been acquired in a few minutes, by a single act ; it was the fruit of many deeds, the result of a great effort ; and it was the only good influence in William Holdsworth's life. He carried it with him through the days that were to come, and in all human probability was a better and a happier man for the burden of it.

But as he walked across the heath, his mind was filled with another thought not totally

unconnected with Sam Crozier. The singer had told him in very plain language that Elma Valliant must not be molested by his attentions, and now that the spirit of adventure had hold of him (for it is like fever and ague, which may be allayed but never killed), he knew that he did not love her. In his strange capricious nature there was a crooked desire at work which may perhaps have led to this conclusion by reason of the feeling that he was at liberty now to love and woo her (Sam Crozier having no further authority in the matter), and therefore the wish to do so was no longer so strong. The incentive of competition, or rather of pugnacity, no longer urged him to give other men trouble for his own amusement.

And—in seeking to account for what followed—let us give him credit for good feeling, for a real honest desire to repair harm done. We cannot, or we do not, often give others credit for the best motives;—in fact we usually assign the worst, with reason, you will say. Perhaps it is so. But let us give William Holdsworth the benefit of the doubt in this case; let us

pretend for once to believe that there is a little elementary, sedimentary good in human nature. Of course his action was impulsive; the words he spoke to one who listened to them greedily enough were dictated by a mere passing influence, a flighty warmth of gratitude. But impulsive good is better than no good at all. Had he been given time to deliberate, it is probable that a prudent reticence would have been the result. But it happened that as he walked home that morning, with the excitement of the previous day still thrilling through his being, with gratitude still warming his heart, and with the singer's influence still upon him, he met Elma Valliant. Not only did he meet her, but circumstances threw him into her individual society for some length of time.

Taking advantage of his absence Elma had bethought herself of driving over to see old Mr. and Mrs. Holdsworth, and had chosen this bright cold morning to do so. Had she seen Willy Holdsworth on the road in front of her it is probable that she would have pulled up her self-willed pony and turned him round; but

this chance of avoiding him was not afforded her. Her road ran at right angles to his, and he reached the corner before she did, but the sound of wheels made him turn, and the recognition was mutual and instantaneous. There was nothing for him to do but stand and wait for her at the cross-roads; there was nothing for her but to drive on.

He raised his hat with a grave smile, and with quick feminine instinct she gave a little sigh of relief as she acknowledged his salutation. She saw at once that a new humour was upon him—his mood leant neither towards love-making nor merry-making. He was therefore not dangerous, and might even be pleasant. His eyes were steadier, and his erect carriage firmer, but beyond these details there was something else—something vague and indefinite, which rendered him more manly than he had ever been in her sight before.

They had not spoken since a certain evening when events had occurred in a conservatory such as may be of small account in a man's life, while they leave a girl somewhat different, marking

her existence with an immovable milestone which is almost a turning-point.

She drew up with a little smile quite free from embarrassment, and held out her gauntleted hand. I wonder if any of us will ever quite understand a woman! It seemed impossible that the last time these two had met he had made base use of his manly superiority of strength to kiss her against her will. Yet she remembered each detail—even to a crushed flower and deranged lock of hair—better than he did, as she smiled innocently into his face.

“This is an inglorious way of returning to the paternal roof,” she said, lightly.

“Yes,” he answered, after the fashion of a man who is speaking of one thing and thinking of another; “yes, they will be surprised to see me.”

“You have come earlier than you intended, have you not?” she asked.

“Yes, Elma,” he said, and there was a new gravity in his voice which made her look suddenly at him, instead of towards the pony.

“I thought so,” she murmured, in a tone which invited him to proceed.

“I am off again,” he said, moving restlessly from one foot to the other; “I cannot stand this country-squire life any longer.”

Elma stroked the back of her pony thoughtfully with the end of the whip, but made no comment.

“I am glad we met,” he added. “I wanted to see you.”

For a moment the girl was uneasy, then her eyes met his, and she saw that there was no cause for any such feeling. He made no attempt to explain his outburst of passion on the last occasion of their meeting, but simply ignored it. This method is scarcely recommendable to young men of impressionable hearts, although in this exceptional case it was perhaps the best thing Holdsworth could have done. But as a rule it is very dangerous to ignore having once told a woman that you loved her. Apologize—tell lies—make excuses—humble yourself, but do not ignore it! Whether she love you or not, she will never forgive such a sin as that.

“I have something to tell you,” he went on to say, moving away a few steps, and laying his

hand upon the horse's broad back where the whip had been a few moments before. "Shall I tell you now—on the king's highway—or shall I wait till the inspiration goes from me and never tell you at all?" he asked, with a slight smile in his blue eyes as they rested candidly on her puzzled young face. She raised her glance to his, meeting him kindly, sweetly, inscrutably.

"Perhaps you had better decide," she said incisively, "so much depends upon what it is that you have to tell me."

He stroked the sleek pony reflectively, then without looking towards her he spoke with a certain continuous deliberation which allowed of no interruption.

"I do not know," he said, "what you have heard about me—about my past life, I mean. Probably a little truth, and a good many lies. I don't *want* to know. But there are a few things I should like you to hear before I go away, because it often happens that the truth is not so bad as uncontradicted exaggerations which may be only half believed. I won't

trouble you with details. Many of them are not pleasant, and some there are which are better suppressed. People say, Elma, that there is no such thing as bad luck. Never believe that, never believe that a man has only himself to blame for what comes to him! There is something else at work—something raising or lowering his life, quite beyond his reach, quite outside his power. Call it by what name you like—Providence with a big P or luck with a small l—the result is the same as far as our lives are concerned. Mine has not been quite a success, I suppose. In fact it has been an utter failure.” . . .

He laughed shortly, and defied her to contradict him by a quaintly humorous glance which was really somewhat pathetic.

“Is it not,” she suggested, “rather premature to give a judgment yet?”

“I doubt it,” he replied, “unless luck changes.”

With ready tact she avoided raising a discussion respecting the much-maligned little word, which he repeated so often with a certain cynicism. Whatever she may have thought, she

silently acquiesced in his theory that human lives are laid out upon a fatalistic, immovable plan which no earthly influence can alter.

“I can honestly say,” he continued, “without thought of complaint or irreverence, that I have had luck dead against me from the beginning. Of course I have been to blame; but really, Elma, really and truly, on my word as . . . let us say ‘a gentleman’ just for once, I have had consistent bad luck all through, and people soon recognize an unlucky man. They won’t help him, and often they won’t employ him. But . . . there has been one man. In all these last ten years of steady progress downhill, I have only passed one man who made a grab at me. And he did more; he came down a little, and tried to haul me up again. Time after time he succeeded, time after time I slipped again; but he never turned from me. He never lost patience, and never, while our lives were thrown together, gave up the attempt. But he grew hard—hard and unmerciful—he lost faith in me at last. Perhaps he is by nature what is called a hard man. But I know that he spares himself

as little as he spares others. Things have been bad ; Elma, I have been farther down the hill than I like to think of when I am near you ; but if it had not been for that man I should not have been here now. I should not have had the chance that I have before me now, of trying my luck again. I was once a sailor”

He stopped speaking. The reins which had hitherto been lying loosely upon the pony's back had suddenly been drawn tight. He glanced at her, and saw a slight flush upon her cheeks. Her features were too still to be quite natural.

“You have guessed who it is,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” she answered, looking past him across the heath—“Sam Crozier.”

“How do you know ?” he asked sharply, with a ring of emotion in his voice which was very near akin to pain. “What made you guess ? Surely he has not told you.”

“No,” she answered. “No. He . . . has told me nothing. It was a mere guess.”

“But there must have been something—something to make you guess”—suspiciously.

“It never occurred to me before this moment

to think that you might have met before, but I have always noticed some points of resemblance. You hold yourselves in the same way, and . . . and you both use your hands quite differently from other men. I suppose it comes from having been sailors."

"We were shipmates," said Holdsworth, as if that explained everything. "He has done more for me and attempted more than any man on earth; and I suppose it is the natural consequence that, now that it is too late, I would sooner have Sam Crozier's esteem than that of any man. At first he began by liking me, I honestly believe. When I got into trouble he pitied me and still believed in me; now he simply despises me."

"Are you not," she asked softly, "making out the worst case you can against yourself, Willy? I do not think that Mr. . . . that he despises you. He is too just to despise any man."

"It is his justice that does it," answered Holdsworth, with an awkward laugh. "Unfortunately he has a right to treat me as he does. He cannot understand weakness of any

description—and I suppose I am weak. I know that I cannot rely upon myself. The desire to do the proper thing is there right enough, but when the time comes I somehow cannot do it. Luck is against me, and”—here he shrugged his shoulders—“I suppose I am weak. At least, Crozier thinks that I am ; I can see that.”

Elma was puzzled. This ex-sailor was beyond her grasp of character. He had puzzled a much deeper thinker than her, for Crozier had striven in vain to get at the man's real inner self. There was much good, and really very little that was bad in William Holdsworth, but the blend was so irregular that evil seemed to predominate. He made the most of his bad qualities, as unambitious men are in the habit of doing ; and with his virtues he made a very poor show. Moreover, he was disappointed in life, and somewhat bored ; taking a queer delight in boasting of his own failures.

“Holdsworth,” Crozier had once said to him from the quarter-deck when they were both in oilskins, which sometimes covers gold-lace and its subtle differences at sea, “you want ballast.

You would be better for it in fair weather as well as in foul."

A few words spoken in kindly praise—shouted rather, for a typhoon raged round them, and the air was seething—at the successful termination of a wild feat aloft which made Holdsworth's name known on every ship of the China squadron. "The fellow who cut away the *Willow-wren's* fore-topmast," they said on the quarter-deck. "The d—d fool who went aloft in a typhoon," they grumbled in the fore-castle.

"I do not think that he is a hard man," pleaded Elma, examining the lash of her whip.

"He was a strict disciplinarian at sea."

"But is that the same thing?" asked the girl. "A disciplinarian is as hard upon himself as upon other men."

"Yes—he never spared himself. But he does not make the least allowance for difference of temperament. He forgets that other men are not like himself—not cool and self-suppressing . . ."

"I do not think that you understand him," interrupted she, thoughtfully.

"He does not understand me."

Then the quick-witted girl began to suspect that the sailor's words were not prompted by ill-feeling. He spoke against his former officer in a peculiar, insincere way, as if seeking to lay the blame upon another for something that had come between them. She felt that the spirit of enmity had no place here. There was another influence at work, and instinctively she hit very near the mark. There was in her mind no definite thought that Holdsworth was suffering under the sting of unsatisfied gratitude."

"But," said she, "you tell me that he has done a great deal for you—that he has helped you, and—and that you are grateful to him."

She was watching his face now, and saw the contraction of his lips; the pained, dissatisfied gleam in his blue eyes as he looked across the heath, seeing nothing. And with a woman's quick warm sympathy she pitied him. She knew then, and never afterwards deviated from the conviction, that Sam Crozier had made a mistake. The singer in his strong manliness treated Holdsworth as his own equal; treated him as a man, strong in his convictions, steady in his purpose;

giving him credit for two qualities which he was without. She felt that there were passages in the lives of this man and of Samuel Crozier of which she knew nothing, and of which she would in all probability never learn the details; but instinctive judgment (a woman's monopoly) told her that by some warp the better nature of William Holdsworth had never had fair play.

"Yes," he answered, gravely, "he has done more for me than I can tell you of—more than he thinks; but not more than I realize. And what is the result from his point of view? He looks upon me now, at this moment, as an outcast, a hopeless vagabond, a failure. He will never believe to his dying day that I have really tried to do better—not from instinctive desires, not from fear of the law, but in order to show him that his pains and his . . . great . . . kindness have not been thrown away. Whenever I try to show him this I fail. Whenever I come to him, it is not to hold out my hand and tell him that he can take it without fear or shame—it is to ask his help. Only last night, Elma; not twelve hours ago I . . . was forced to go to him.

He never suspected what it cost me to do so—he never cared whether I thought of killing myself first or not. All he knew and all he saw was an outcast, a runaway, a criminal, and he never cared to look deeper.”

He stopped and looked towards her suddenly, surprising a soft and almost tearful look in her eyes. He was telling it simply as a story—a mere relation of facts; but she saw the weary pathos of it, and the old time-worn limit that foils all human attempts to make human life a better thing than it is.

“It is a long story,” he said, apologetically; “I don’t know why I should trouble you with it.”

“Go on,” she answered, “I am listening.”

“Yet,” continued Holdsworth, “he helped me. He deliberately broke the law to save me. And as usual he succeeded—Crozier always succeeds in the end. When I tried to thank him he shut me up . . . brutally. When I talked of gratitude he laughed.”

The sailor laughed bitterly, and waited for her comment.

“How utterly,” she said at length, very

gently ; “ how utterly you have misunderstood each other ! ”

“ I suppose he is right,” continued Holdsworth, after a pause ; “ I suppose he is quite right. Of what possible value can my thanks be to him ? What difference can it make to such a man as Crozier whether a vagabond be grateful to him or hate him ? ”

Ah—vanity—vanity ! The wise old Preacher caught you centuries ago. And still you flit about among human motives, touching them all, branding them all with your evil mark !

So Elma learnt it at last. At last she reached the root of the affair, the base of the widening gulf that lay between two brave men. And there, of course, she found Vanity.

“ He told me,” continued the sailor, “ that he did not do it for my sake, but for the sake of the ship.”

Elma almost smiled, the detail was so like Crozier. He had an aggravating way of screening himself behind a false motive. He might profess to have helped his shipmate for old associations’ sake ; he might even persuade

himself that his motive was no higher; but Elma thought she knew better. She knew Samuel Crozier too well to believe that.

"And you believed him?" she asked, incredulously.

"Yes; he meant it."

Elma shook her head with petulant impatience.

"Some day," he went on to say, "he will mention my name, and you may have an opportunity of telling him what I have told you. I should like to tell all the world, because people do not know what Samuel Crozier is. You may tell every one that a scamp once said that he was the finest and the best man, the ablest seaman and the truest gentleman that he ever met. And, Elma, remember that scamps see the best side of human nature. If you should ever speak of me, don't tell him of any protestations of mine. Simply say that I have gone away to try again. If ever I come back it will not be as, what Tom calls, 'a returned empty.' I shall come back with clean hands, or not at all. Now—he does not refuse to shake hands, but he never offers to."

He smiled vaguely, and moved away a little with his hand upraised towards his hat. But Elma stopped him.

“Shall I not see you again before you go?”

“No!”

She held out her hand with a pretty little air of bravado.

“Good-bye then, and good luck.”

He returned and took her fingers within his.

“God bless you, Elma!” he mumbled awkwardly; “you are more charitable than Crozier.”

Then he raised his hat and left her. She turned and drove home slowly, meditating over men and their ways. A week ago this man had told her, with all appearance of sincerity and truth, that he loved her; and she knew now, without shred of doubt or misconception, that he had never loved her at all. This was the text of her meditations.



CHAPTER XI.

THE BUSHEL RAISED.

LADY FIRTON'S ball was as usual fixed for the Thursday after Easter. This function was an annual affair, and young couples wondered in that suggestive and dangerously melancholy manner, which is the result of supper and bad air, how many times they had danced together in her ladyship's drawing-room.

Ah, those balls! How many a tragedy has worked itself out while the musicians rubbed their hands together and rested during the pauses? How many a breaking heart has whirled round a brilliantly-lighted room, and how many bright eyes have grown brighter or suddenly dim in sequestered corridors and twilight conservatory! How many tears have

been brushed aside with tiny lace handkerchiefs never woven for else than ornament? It is better, however, to take these entertainments as they are. The smiling faces must assuredly belong to happy careless hearts. The brilliant toilets, the gay light flimsy dresses must of course cover healthy young bodies untouched by disease or illness. Young, happy, careless, thoughtless—let them dance. Let hand clasp hand, and arm encircle waist. Let the old buffers like you and me, *mon ami*, lean against the wall and talk to the dowagers, without seeking to look beneath the surface of things. Only—only there is an uncomfortable memory behind this pen. Not ancient history by any means—not an old time story improved by the crust of years—for it has lived only twelve hours—a few short night and morning hours ago. There was the usual brilliant room. The gay dresses were there, and the smiling faces. I did not know many of them—only half-a-dozen or so. And yet I know of tears—two of those young faces were wet with them during the evening. And the other side—the black-coated side of the

question ! I see a life made and another marred. All this between the conventional hours of nine o'clock post meridian and two in the morning. Assuredly it is better to keep to the surface of things.

To Lady Firton's ball was usually bidden the latest literary star, and a choice selection of lions. This was not because her ladyship (a sensible little woman, with a romantic heart of her own) loved lions, but because she recognized the wisdom of providing them, just as much as she knew that ices and lemonade were necessary.

Elma Valliant was one of her ladyship's most reliable young ladies. She always came to town immediately before the ball, and spent two or three days among flowers and carpetless rooms, making herself generally useful. The squire and Mrs. Valliant usually stayed with other friends, and appeared among the first arrivals.

Tom, of course, was invited, and Sam Crozier was an *habitué* of the house, and a special friend of the clever and successful diplomatist, Sir Thomas Firton, who was reputed to speak eleven languages.

On this occasion, however, Tom Valliant refused. To Lady Firton he made a conventional excuse. To Crozier he laughingly declared that his dancing days were done, and to Elma he would say nothing serious at all, merely turning off her questions with a joke. With the crowd Crozier arrived. He made a semi-sarcastic boast of passing anywhere with the crowd, among which, however, he was never a nonentity, try as he might.

Through the crush he ultimately made his way to Elma's side, and as he shook hands noticed that she was wearing white stephanotis, sent to her no doubt by Tom.

"Are you really alone?" she asked. "Has Tom not come?"

"No; he has not come."

"Why . . . I wonder?"

"I don't know at all," he answered carelessly, for he thought that Elma knew more about it than himself. "May I have a dance . . . ?" he continued, holding out his hand for her card.

With a gracious but mechanical little bow she gave it to him, and watched his face with a

coquettish smile of amusement as he studied it gravely.

"There is nothing . . ." he said, offering to return the card—"nothing left."

She allowed him a few seconds to express his disappointment, but he said nothing, merely standing before her in silence, holding out the card.

"All those," she said confidentially at length, "marked T. V. are at your disposal—to choose from, I mean . . ."

She turned away from him to speak to some one else, leaving her programme in his possession, and he heard her say that she had no dances left disengaged.

"Did you keep these for Tom?" he asked incautiously, when she turned to him again.

"Yes," she answered, indignantly, "but he has not come to claim them; so," she added, "you may take your choice."

Without a word he gave her back the card. Over the delicately-traced letters T. V. he had on all three occasions written deeply the initials S. C.

She saw what he had done, and slipped the card into the front of her dress, with a little laugh expressive of suggested remonstrance.

“Is that all right?” he asked gravely, before moving away to shake hands with Sir Thomas Firton.

“No,” she answered in the same tone, with however a little twinkle of mischief lurking beneath her lashes. “No, I should think it is wrong.”

And with a slow smile and murmured “Thank you” he went away, moving through the crowd laboriously, for he had many greetings to acknowledge and exchange. This he did with quiet geniality, and a sublime unconsciousness of being the most popular man in the room.

Later, when he came to claim his first dance, he found Elma in the same dangerous humour; coquettish and kind by turns, sweetly grave and mischievously gay alternately.

“Why did Tom not come?” she asked, imperiously, as she took the singer’s arm. The question implied plainly that she had by no means forgotten that this waltz belonged by rights to her cousin.

"Goodness knows," he answered, shrugging his shoulders hopelessly.

"C'est possible, but . . . do you?"

"No; I have not the least idea. He does not care much for dancing, I believe."

They began waltzing, and the floor was crowded, so the conversation dropped for a few moments.

"Have you seen him to-day?" she asked presently.

"Yes, I saw him for a few minutes."

"In town?" she asked.

"Yes."

"At Myra's?" she persisted.

"Ye-es," he answered, with some slight hesitation.

At this moment the crowd suddenly increased. It was almost a block, but Crozier detected an outlet, and escaped through it, reversing and steering admirably. When they were upon a clearer floor he laughed.

"They seem to be rather jammed in that corner," he observed in a lighter tone, which

had the effect of driving away the gravity which had come into Elma's eyes.

"Yes," she answered, "we are well out of it, thanks to your seamanlike manœuvre. I suppose that is part of your discarded profession?"

"What—getting out of a tight place?"

"Yes."

"It is better never to get in," he replied gravely.

"By the way," she said, with apparent lack of sequence, "do you know that Willy Holdsworth has gone away again?"

"The young fellow," he suggested, with innocent interrogation, "who lived with his father and mother near Goldheath?"

She did not answer, but looked up with peculiarly unsteady lips into his eyes. He could not understand at all the expression of her face. It was a strange mixture of suppressed laughter and something else—something very different, which he could not define.

"You are splendid," she said, with a faint suggestion of reproach; "simply splendid."

For once in his life he was taken aback—all

aback, he would have said technically. After a pause, however, he looked down quizzically at his own apparel.

“Yes,” he murmured, complacently, “I think my get-up is very nice.”

She did not laugh, but merely gave the faintest of smiles as a tribute to his wit.

“If ever,” she said, “I am overburdened with a secret ; if I feel that I must tell somebody or . . . or die, I will choose you ; you are like a well.”

“With Truth hidden in it ?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered guilelessly, “most certainly ; with Truth hidden in it.”

“Thank you,” he said airily ; “but please explain. You must remember that I am a little dense. I am not a quick thinker . . . like Tom.”

There was contradiction written in her eyes ; but she said nothing for some moments. At last she made a little movement, dragged slightly upon his arm, which he promptly and correctly read as a suggestion to stop. They passed out of the room into a smaller apartment where all was quiet.

“Willy Holdsworth,” she then said, “spoke to me before he went away.”

“Oh!”—doubtfully.

“He gave me a slight sketch of the career—the downward career—of a rolling stone.”

“Rash man,” suggested Crozier, uncomfortably. She looked at him gravely, almost impatiently.

“I have acknowledged,” she said, “that you are splendid; is it necessary for you to keep it up any longer?”

“That depends,” he answered unabashed, with a deprecating smile, “upon how much he told you.”

“I think he told me everything—suppressing only a few details unfit for my delicate attention.”

Still Crozier looked embarrassed and somewhat doubtful.

“You can dispense with the bushel”—looking at him with grave meaning.

“It is an article,” he returned, “of which I make little use. My light may flicker, but it is fully exposed to the public gaze.”

She shook her head in contradiction.

“That is hardly the pure and simple truth. On several occasions I have come suddenly upon

good that has been done by stealth. You need not deny it. I like doing it very much indeed."

He moved restlessly, and looked round the room in a vague, smiling way. The exhausted dancers were now appearing in couples seeking seats.

"Please do not look so very solemn," he pleaded, in a lowered voice. "These observant people will think that we have been quarrelling, or . . ."

He stopped suddenly.

"Or what?"

"Or boring each other."

Elma laughed, but made no further answer. For some moments they sat without speaking, then Crozier moved briskly, drawing in his legs and sitting forward.

"This is not ball-room behaviour," he remarked. "We should be talking weather very gravely, or nonsense noisily. At all events we ought to smile vapidly and look pleased with ourselves."

Ignoring these weighty suggestions, she spoke in the same serious strain.

“He sent a message to you, Sam. That is why I mentioned his name.”

“Indeed”—with some interest. “What was it?”

“He asked me to tell you that he has gone away to try again—that is all.”

Crozier brushed aside his moustache by a quick movement of his hand, first to one side and then to the other. It was a habit with him upon the platform, or when he wished to think deeply. He always began to sing with that quick movement of the hand.

“Nothing more?” he asked.

“No; nothing more.”

He sat gazing thoughtfully across the room at nothing in particular, while in his deep set eyes there came a melancholy, dissatisfied expression, such as always shows itself upon the face of a man who is looking back over a past that might have been improved. Of course we all have such a view behind us. *Cela va sans dire*. But how many of us look, and how many recognize the mistakes that have been made? There was no actual remorse in Crozier’s heart. Indeed he

would have acted in the same way in like circumstances again. It was an unfortunate chance—that was all—that a strong man should have become the benefactor of a weak one who was no coward. With courage Samuel Crozier expected to find steadfastness, and found it not. From him Holdsworth looked for a tolerance unnatural in a self-judging, self-suppressing man. The disappointment was mutual, and its influence stronger upon the characters of the two sailors than one would have imagined. It almost seemed that they had not met upon the broad highway of life by mere accident. There was something more than chance in the drawing together of these two men—both born on Goldheath—upon the high seas.

We must simply acknowledge that human influence goes for naught in this existence. Man's work unto man is nothing, else why should Crozier have failed in his attempt, pure enough and disinterested, to benefit a straggler upon the highway? Why should they have parted in haste in the Blackfriars' Bridge Road never to meet again—never to learn that each

had done some good unto the other—that the misunderstanding between their finite hearts was also finite.

Elma knew that there was woman's work to do here—for women were most assuredly intended to patch up man's faulty nature; to bring men together and soften the grating angles. But she recoiled before the task which was utterly beyond her powers. She could only tell Samuel Crozier what had happened. To influence him directly was more than she could accomplish, though she almost felt herself within reach of the misunderstanding. She could almost lay her hand upon the fault and say, "This or that have you done wrong;" but something held her back—some strange shyness. And so she attempted nothing.

Presently there was a movement among the guests, and Crozier rose from his seat, offering his arm. In a Cinderella dance men seek their partners early, and so there is no time to be lost.

As they crossed the room together Crozier looked down at his companion, and said in an explanatory tone—

"There is much good in Holdsworth, I am sure; but somehow he has been unfortunate. The good has not yet had an opportunity of coming out."

She made no answer; indeed she could not do so, because her partner for the next dance was standing before her.

They did not again talk of William Holdsworth during the evening. There were other subjects which interested them, and when they parted at the end of their last dance together they did so merrily and unconcernedly. She upbraided him for laziness in going home so early, and he laughingly replied that there was now nothing to retain him at the ball, which compliment she acknowledged with a gay nod.

There was no slightest premonition, no instinctive foreknowledge that they were to meet again before the dawn of the next day. As usual, Crozier was gravely ready to fall into any humour that might be influencing her—as usual, she was gay and incomprehensible.

He elbowed his way through the throng with the little half coquettish nod and the glance of

the defiant eyes still in his memory, and he did not know that she was watching him while she talked to her partner.

Without attracting undue attention he made his way out of the house. He never quite defined the feeling that prompted him to leave Lady Firton's so early. Such a proceeding was contrary to custom, for he was not a "*blasé*" man at all, and being an enthusiastic dancer as well as a keeper of very late hours, he was usually among the last to leave. The cheery little hostess did not fail to notice his early departure, for she had counted upon his remaining to the second informal supper after the guests had left.

He had a vague intention of "looking up" Tom Valliant—not such a difficult task in their small Bohemian world as one would imagine.

When he had passed down the broad stone steps into the dark square he found a long file of deserted cabs. The men were congregated together in the middle of the road, and in a moment the singer saw the reason of it. To the

eastward, over the denser parts of London, there hovered in the sky a shimmering glow of light.

With that easy sense of intercourse with a lower class which most men learn at sea, Crozier joined the group.

“A fire?” he said, interrogatively.

“Yessir,” answered a man near to him, “and a big ‘un too.”

The sky was all rosy, while the glow rose and fell unsteadily. Observing this a young cabman took his pipe from his lips and expectorated energetically.

“See it jumpin’?” he observed. “That shows it’s near.”

“It’s in the Strand, that’s my opinion,” said a gruff voice in the background.

“I believe it is,” rejoined Crozier; “somewhere near Bratton Street. I am going in that direction—who will drive me?—a hansom, I mean.”

“I’m your man, Mr. Crozier,” said a young fellow who, with the keenness of his race, had recognized the singer; “I’m first on the rank, and a good horse too.”

Crozier followed the cab-driver, and in a few minutes was rolling through quiet streets towards the Strand. He had directed the man to drive to Myra's, and proceeded to light the inevitable cigar; no easy task in a brisk south-easterly breeze.





CHAPTER XII.

THE FIRE.

CROZIER was right. The fire was in Bratton Street. Moreover, it was at Myra's. Fortunately the theatre-traffic had been disposed of before that stout lady began raking out her grill with a crooked poker.

Mishaps of all descriptions have a peculiar way of appearing almost impossible before the event, and absurdly easy after. The front of the grill fell out, and the burning coals rolled upon the floor. One reached as far as the curtain of the inner bar, which blazed up at once. In a few moments it was wrenched from its rings by Tom Valliant from within, but the thin, heavily varnished woodwork was already alight. Still it would have been quite possible

to pass unhurt through the blazing doorway. But Tom did not attempt it. Through the smoke and flame the occupants of the outer bar, with whom was now a policeman, saw him return to Syra. The girl was a prisoner behind the curved bar, surrounded by brilliant bottles, decanters, and glasses. Against the little doorway at the far end of the counter, the flap of which Syra had already raised, was a heavy box containing bottles of mineral water, and this she was in vain attempting to push aside. When she did not come to his side, Tom glanced over his shoulder and saw the reason of her delay. Then he laughed—actually laughed with the smoke and flames rising all round him.

“Wait a second!” he cried, and leaving the burning curtain on the floor, he went to her rescue.

In the meantime the policeman was bravely fighting in the outer bar, but the fire spread terribly. A living cinder had fallen among a pile of newspapers beneath the counter, and these were now blazing, while the thin wood-work crackled. The man had nothing but his

waterproof cape, and with this he was endeavouring to stifle the flames, but his hands were badly burnt, and he was half stupefied and blinded by the acrid smoke that came from the varnished wood.

Myra it was who, standing behind the policeman, still grasping the crooked poker, saw that the two occupants of the inner bar could not pass out because the floor was alight.

“You cannot get through now,” she shrieked. “Go back—go up-stairs!”

“Yes,” cried the policeman, as he staggered back baffled and blinded, “yes, go back—go up-stairs!”

Seizing his arm, Myra dragged the man out into the street. The outer bar was no longer tenable. Already there was a cordon of policemen forming a semicircle round the blazing house, and keeping back the excited crowd.

“Is there anybody in the house?” asked an inspector, hurriedly.

“Yes,” answered Myra, gasping; “there’s two. They’ve gone up-stairs.”

The inspector stepped back and looked up

anxiously at the windows. Through those on the first floor came a dull red gleam, showing that the flames had penetrated the ceiling of the ground-floor. Then he spoke a few words to a policeman near him, who immediately pushed his way through the crowd, and ran up the street in the direction of Covent Garden.

The inspector returned to Myra, who stood silently wringing her hands in the semicircle formed by the policemen.

"Have you much spirit in cask in the house?" he asked.

"Yes. There's forty gallons of whisky in the cellar under the bar; and there's over a hundred dozen of different spirits in the two bars and the cellar."

The inspector tugged at his chin-strap, and glanced uneasily up and down the street.

"Any paraffin?" he inquired, sharply.

"No!"

"Nor gunpowder?"

"No! What would I be doing with gunpowder?"

A hoarse shout at the corner where Bratton

Street joined the Strand interrupted them. This was immediately recognized by the crowd, and greeted with a cheer. The crowd fell back, and the first engine, a "steam," with gleaming brass funnel, pulled up with a rattle of chains. The men were off before the horses had recovered themselves, and in an incredibly short space of time the hose was run out, while two men ran with a lighter pipe to the nearest hydrant. The crowd cheered again. They were getting excited, and the inspector sent a messenger for more men. In a few moments three more engines arrived, and suddenly the assembled multitude raised a great ringing cheer, which completely drowned the hoarse grunting of the steam-engine, which was now at work, literally jumping at each throb of the pump.

The reason of the shout was that Tom Valliant had appeared at the second storey window. Some broken glass falling at his feet apprised the inspector of this, and he stepped back into the middle of the street. The window was small, and Tom was breaking away the frame for greater convenience in getting out. When

the cheer had died away, a dozen hoarse voices were raised, each shouting different instructions. The inspector of police was now placed in a secondary position by the arrival of a district chief of the fire brigade. The nearest escape had been sent for some time ago, but there were as yet no signs of its approach. A few minutes more and the two occupants of the small room upon the second floor would be compelled to choose between a jump into the blankets already awaiting them, and a retreat to the third floor.

At this moment a fireman approached his chief and spoke for some moments with him.

“Well, you can try it,” said the chief at length, and he turned to make a sign to Tom to remain where he was for a few minutes more. Almost immediately the fireman reappeared. He had in his hand a coil of rope sufficiently stout to bear the weight of two or three persons. The police had now formed a double cordon across the street, completely blocking the traffic, while behind their dark forms extended a sea

of anxious, eager faces, upturned to the flames that lit them up luridly.

It seemed almost impossible to throw a rope from the street up to the window where Tom Valliant and Syra were waiting, but the fireman was an old Dover pier-head hand, who had not thrown ropes for five years by day and night in all winds and weathers in vain.

He now mounted on the level top of a manual engine which quivered and throbbed beneath his feet. Then with the old familiar "Stand by!" he adjusted the coils. Looking up, he rapidly measured the distance, and swinging back his whole body, he threw the rope. It whistled through the smoke-laden air, freeing its snake-like coils as it flew.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Bravo!"

With one coil to spare it fell clean into the window, and Tom Valliant caught the end. He disappeared into the room for a moment and secured the rope. In the mean time the fireman had leapt from the manual engine. The rope had to be drawn taut in a slanting direction up the hill. Had it been allowed to hang straight down

from the window, not only would descent by it have been impossible, but it would have been burnt in a moment, because the flames were darting out of the large ground-floor window, and the frames of those on the first-floor were burning, the glass having long ago fallen.

A hundred willing hands grasped the rope and drew it tight. A man of ordinary strength could now descend without much risk, hand-under-hand, swinging in mid-air. It was merely a matter of unusual tension on the arms for a few minutes; many schoolboys would have been willing to undertake it for the fun of the thing.

The upturned faces worked and twitched convulsively, many unemotional men talked hurriedly to themselves, some shouted aloud, and others spoke to those around them and were in nowise heeded.

They could see that Tom Valliant was explaining to the girl, who had remained singularly calm throughout, how she should cling to him. Then she appeared to refuse to burden him with her weight, which could not, however, have been

very great, because, although above the medium height, she was slightly formed. She shook her head and appeared to be urging him to go alone. They both leant out of the window and looked up the street, evidently in the hope that the fire-escape might be in sight.

Then the chief of the fire brigade raised his voice for the first time with all the science of a man accustomed to making himself heard.

“Come on, come on, my girl!” he shouted; “you only have a minute more!” And the crowd heard every word.

Valliant was seen to speak hurriedly, and at last it would seem that the girl gave in. Again he instructed her how to hold firmly on to him, and then climbed half out of the window, with one leg in and the other out. The crowd was silent now, and only the throb of the engines rose above the steady roar of the fire, while occasionally a distant whistle rang out as the firemen called for a greater pressure of water on their hose.

Valliant turned sideways and stretched out his arms to Syra in order to help her out of the

window. With his assistance she crept out and took her place beside him.

“That’s right,” cried the chief of the firemen. “Never fear!”

Valliant’s evident intention was to slip off the window-sill and swing from the rope. That first wrench on his arms would be the worst. Syra was to place her arms round him; one over his shoulder and the other beneath, clasping her hands firmly together, while he gave her what support he could with his legs.

She had actually thrown her arms round him, and was sitting on the very verge of the window-sill, when Valliant suddenly cried out something which was unintelligible to the crowd, although the words sounded like, “Look out, Syra!”

Suddenly abandoning his intention of grasping the rope with both hands, he half turned and clutched vaguely and unsteadily at the framework of the window. The movement overbalanced the girl, whose hold round him was for the moment loosened, as he had fallen back, crushing her hands between himself and the brickwork of the window.

Before any one could realize what had happened, there was a sickening crash upon the wet pavement. Two policemen rushed forward, but their inspector motioned them to stop.

“A blanket,” he said, shortly and sharply, “or a sheet. You must not try to lift her!”

Very tenderly the three big men knelt on the streaming pavement. For a moment there was a great hush as the awestruck multitude surged backwards and forwards. Syra lay very still, and made no sound. Silently she had fallen; silently she lay as the three men bent over her—for they were merely three men now, not two policemen in the presence of their superior officer. The dainty figure in its close-fitting black dress was slightly twisted to one side, the rounded arms and deft fingers were limp and nerveless. The white, immobile face bore no sign of pain. There was no trace to tell that fear had crisped the features. They were indeed perfect now in their great repose, for the sweet mouth was no longer twisted sideways and upwards as if existence were an effort. The effort was not needed now, for Syra was dead. The infinite tenderness with

which she was raised and carried away was futile, because earthly pain was hers no more.

In the mean time Tom Valliant had remained for a moment balancing upon the window-sill. Then he fell backwards into the room. He must have recovered partial consciousness almost at once, for he was standing at the window the next minute. With one hand he held mechanically to the window-frame, while the other was pressed to his breast. His face was pallid, and his eyes quite dull and lifeless. The effort was nothing more than physical, and it seemed as if he did not know where he was. The glare was very great now, and he was visible to all. From that surge of frantic faces a thousand eyes watched his slightest movement.

The chief of the fire brigade looked anxiously up the street. "D——n that escape!" he muttered. "Is it never coming?"

His question was answered by a distant shout, and the tall, weird machinery of the ladder appeared at the summit of the short hill. A hundred onlookers ran to meet it, shouting as they went, and pointing to the window where

Tom Valliant was. He had now fallen forwards across the sill.

As the escape neared the house it began to sway and totter from side to side, and the crowd looked up apprehensively. Then suddenly a mighty cheer arose. The tall red ladder was swaying because a man was already half way up it, running lightly up the rungs without however touching them with his fingers. His hands were round the uprights—a way we are taught at sea.

The average Englishman is an unemotional being, but he is not devoid of that spice of life which is vaguely called the devil. He requires, however, the society of his fellow-men and the spirit of emulation to raise that devil. It is this peculiarity that makes him a good sailor and an excellent soldier—excitement brings out a sudden fierce energy, while the cool independent man is behind it somewhere ready for an emergency. Nevertheless it often happens that a crowd of Englishmen is no more self-contained and no wiser than a crowd of any other nationality, surprising though this may be.

A trifling incident now drove this mass of people, collected in Bratton Street, almost frantic with excitement. This was nothing more than the mere fact that the man who was upon the escape in certain peril of his life was an English gentleman in evening dress, with a white flower gleaming in his button-hole.

But one of the firemen, an old blue-jacket, had caught a glimpse of his face, and saw something more there than a "swell" in dress-clothes.

"Boys," he yelled hoarsely, turning to the crowd, "that's a sailor."

The cry was passed from mouth to mouth, "He's a sailor! he's a sailor!" and immediately there arose a hundred voices encouraging him.

"Stick to it, Jack!" they cried. "Go it, my hearty! God bless ye."

"Ay, d——n him," muttered the man in charge of the escape, as he looked up to take his instructions from Sam Crozier far above his head; "he's a sailor, or else he wouldn't ha' been up there before me!"

The escape was cautiously wheeled nearer to the house, from which the flames were now shooting outwards in forked tongues. From the window where Tom Valliant's inanimate body was still visible there shone a red glare. The fire had reached the second storey, and at any moment the floor might fall in, adding fuel to the flaming, spluttering mass of spirit-soaked wood on the ground where the bar had once been. From the opposite side of the street the firemen were playing into the second storey windows in a vain endeavour to save the floor.

Perched upon the top of the escape, with his legs twined firmly among the rungs, Sam Crozier signed with his right hand to those below to move the ladder nearer to the burning house. Nearer still! Right into the flames. Past his head seethed and roared unheaded the glittering column of water. So great was its force that if the fireman made the slightest mistake, swerving to one side, and hitting him, the shock would undoubtedly have stunned him, causing him to lose his hold.

The crowd saw Crozier leaning towards the

window with outstretched arms, and then there was a tremendous crash, shaking the very earth. A column of smoke and flame seemed to envelope him and he was lost to sight. The second floor had fallen in.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

FOR a moment there was a dead silence and all stood breathless, while the fire roared and cracked. Then the group of firemen at the foot of the escape shouted aloud, and the crowd of onlookers, peering over each other's shoulders, saw Crozier standing among them with the rescued man in his arms.

"He is a friend of mine," said the singer to the police-inspector who had come forward. "I will take him home. He is not burnt. It is only a faint. Let me have a man to clear the way through the crowd."

Before the stalwart constable, the tightly-packed multitude made way respectfully, and as Crozier passed they greeted him with rough words of commendation.

“ Well done, my lad ! ” they said. “ Brayvo ! You’re a good ’un, an’ no mistake ! God bless you for this night’s work ! ”

Some one had called a cab, and Tom Valliant was lifted in. Then the singer turned to the policeman.

“ Here, constable,” he said, in a quietly commanding way, “ I want you to take him home. Number 5 Lime Court, first-floor. This is the latch-key. I am going round by St. Antony’s to bring a doctor, and will be home almost as soon as you.”

The man leaped into the cab, and Crozier gave the driver the address. Then he shouldered his way through the crowd and disappeared in the restless traffic of the Strand. Presently he left the busy thoroughfare and made his way through several narrow passages at a brisk run.

“ If I can only get there before he is called to attend to Syra,” he muttered, breathlessly, as he sped along.

The broad door of St. Antony’s was open when he reached it ; the night-porter who touched his hat to Crozier was directing two policemen

to take the stretcher they were bearing to the end of the passage in front of them where a nurse stood waiting.

“Is Dr. Leonard up-stairs?” asked the singer.

“Yes, sir,” replied the porter—“he’s in his room.”

There was a broad-faced, middle-aged man upon the stairs descending slowly with a smile (which was habitual) on his face.

“Hallo, Sam!” said the gentleman, cheerfully.

“I say, Martin, old fellow,” said Crozier, stopping for a moment, “I am going to take Leonard away for a bit—you don’t mind taking his watch, do you?”

“Not a bit,” was the ready answer. “But, tell me, is there anything wrong?”

“Valliant!” cried the singer, as he sped up-stairs.

The middle-aged man whistled softly, a single prolonged note, and continued his way down-stairs. There was a nurse waiting for him in the passage below.

Crozier found Wilson Leonard in his room. The young doctor was smoking in a deep arm-chair, and slowly turning the pages of a large

scientific work which was fixed on a movable rest attached to the chair.

"Leonard," said the singer, "can you come to Lime Court with me at once?"

The doctor rose from his chair quickly.

"You—Sam!" he exclaimed. "What's up?"

"Tom Valliant . . ." was the reply. "Look sharp, man. Tom is insensible. He wants you badly."

For a moment the singer's voice was unsteady. His deep-set earnest eyes hesitated to meet the grave glance of the young doctor. Leonard wasted no time in taking his hat from a peg behind the door; then he looked round the room as if in search of something.

"What is it?" asked Crozier, sharply.

"My coat."

"Good God, man, come on!" cried the singer, almost fiercely. "What is a coat compared to a man's life?"

Wilson Leonard had known this grave, self-contained man for years. They had been together through many untoward incidents, as through many lighter scenes. He glanced

anxiously into his face as he seized his coat from a chair where it lay.

“All my instruments are in the pockets,” he explained gently, while his mind was busy with the thought that he had never heard Sam Crozier speak like that before. There was a thrill of something which was almost fear in his voice, and Wilson Leonard heard it with a sudden and unaccountable misgiving.

A minute later they passed down the hospital stairs together, and out of the broad door. Crozier was breathing a trifle hard, but it was not from the exertion of running. He had succeeded in getting Leonard away from Saint Antony's without his being confronted by the mangled body of Syra; but there was still the news to be told.

“How did it happen?” asked the doctor, when they were seated in a hansom cab.

“Well, I was not there myself, but it appears that in the midst of great excitement he suddenly fainted. I will tell you afterwards; this beastly cab rattles so much that I cannot make myself heard.”

“Was it at Myra's?”

“Yes,” answered Crozier. Then he recollected that the man was driving them in the direction of the fire. He jumped up and put his head out.

“Go round by the Embankment, cabby,” he shouted; “the Strand is crammed—and go hard!”

The man obeyed the instructions, driving with apparent recklessness at a quick trot down one of the steep and narrow streets that lead from the Strand to the Embankment.

In a few minutes they were in Lime Court. Crozier glanced up at his windows, and saw that they were fully alight. The policeman had arrived with his burden.

They found his helmet and cape in the sitting-room, while the door of the bedroom stood open. Tom Valliant was lying on the bed when they entered, and the policeman was bending over him loosening his clothes gently.

“He’s still insensible, sir,” said the man, standing erect.

Wilson Leonard went forward and leant over the bed. In a few moments he learnt everything.

"How long has he been like this?" he asked.

"About twenty minutes, sir," answered the constable.

Then for the first time since they had entered the room Crozier spoke.

"Mrs. Valliant, his aunt, one of the few relations he has, is in town," he said. "Shall I send for her?"

"Is she," asked the doctor, without turning his attention away from his patient, "the sort of person one *would* send for?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then let her come."

Crozier passed into the other room, followed by the policeman.

"I will write a note," he said, "which I want you to take out and give to a commissionaire; doubtless you know where to find one. Tell him to take a hansom, and drive as hard as he can to the address which he will find on the envelope. There is a ball in the house, so that he will find them still astir."

"Right, sir."

"In the mean time," continued Crozier, "here

is the whiskey-bottle, the water is on the side-board. Help yourself while I write the note."

"Thank you, sir, I will," was the answer. "Such work as we have had to-night is apt to unsteady a man."

The singer nodded his head in acquiescence, although his hand was as steady as a rock while he wrote—

"DEAR MRS. VALLIANT,

"Your nephew Tom has taken seriously ill. He is here, in my rooms; and the doctor on hearing that you were in town asked me to send for you. Hoping that a change for the better will take place before your arrival,

"I am, yours very truly,

"SAMUEL CROZIER."

"It is no good mincing matters with Mrs. Valliant," he reflected, as he folded the letter. "She is not that sort of woman."

He was thinking of the gray eyes with a ring of darker colour round the iris.

The note was despatched, and Crozier returned

to his bedroom. Leonard had drawn forward a chair, and was sitting at the bedside with his fingers clasped round Tom Valliant's wrist.

"Well?" whispered the singer, interrogatively.

The young doctor shook his head significantly.

"I am afraid," he answered, "that he is sinking fast."

And thus they waited for the advent of that dread angel whose wings were even now overshadowing them—the doctor seated by the bedside, the singer standing beside him silently. There was something infinitely pathetic in the utter helplessness of these two helpful men. They could do nothing but wait, each in his characteristic way—Wilson Leonard with grave sympathy, but watchful as behoved his profession; he knew that there was no hope, but being young he hoped still—Sam Crozier, self-restraining and self-contained as usual. During the last hour he had passed through what would have been sufficient to shake the nerve of a strong man, but this ex-sailor knew that there was work for him to do yet—work requiring all his tact and all his wonderful nerve. He stood

there silent in his strength ; not unemotional, not hard-hearted or unfeeling, but simply mastering himself. There is in some men a calmness which is nothing else than density, and a brute-like incapacity to feel sorrow or joy, but his was not this. His was the outcome of a great courage, and an unusual consideration for the feelings of others. It was a very sad picture this, formed by three men in a quiet bedroom in Lime Court ; but the saddest figure in it—ay, sadder than he who lay dying, for he was restful—was that of the quiet, capable-looking man standing behind the doctor's chair. It may be a mistake, but in any kind of strength I cannot help seeing also pathos. When I look up from this paper there is before me a huge fortress practically impregnable—a thing of which the whole country may be proud. But—quite apart from any associations called up by the grim muzzles of its cannon—the sight is a sad one. In its long straight lines, in the gentle curve of its earthworks, there is distinct pathos. And from that fortress, the very embodiment of strength, down to Sam Crozier standing with

his hands in his pockets watching his friend pass away from all earthly joy and sorrow, there is sadness in every strong thing.

They had not long to wait. For some time Tom Valliant's breathing had been laboured and irregular. Presently it simply ceased, and the Answer was his—the Answer to the great unending "Why?" which haunts every human life. It is hard for us to understand why life had been given to him at all, why unusual talents had been vouchsafed, why a brave true heart had beaten in his breast, if this were to be the end of it all.

Here was ambition held back by a terrible certainty of unfulfilment—talent wasted by the thought that there was nothing to work for—love crushed by the knowledge that it dare not ask for love again. Here was a life denuded of all that makes existence a joy, for in that vague uncertain promise which we call the future lies the germ of human happiness. Imagine your own life without a future! You cannot—you dare not. This is no sermon, and it is of *human* life that I am speaking. Some there are who profess to find consolation for all earthly sorrows

in another future far beyond this glimmering shadow we all pursue. But with all their resignation, such worthy and sanctified persons look forward to the nearer future as much as we do, who are without the pale of holiness. In winter they look forward to the spring even as we do—in the spring they pleasantly anticipate summer. Moreover, they complain sadly enough when spring is late in coming.

Tom Valliant's life was like a splendid lamp with too little oil. It lacked an essential of which the absence was not apparent to the onlooker. Others may have suspected it, but he *knew*—knew infallibly and indubitably—that his existence was without a future. There were indeed times when hope seemed for the moment to have overcome science; but science never dies, and never surrenders, she only waits. And so he had to shape his plan of life without an aim; he had to steer his course upon the dark waters without a light or port to make for.

The two living men wondered over these things as they looked upon the pallid, calm face of him whose task was done. There was a

shadowy, vague smile upon the clean-cut features—even death could not drive that away. And they felt that that indefinite smile denoted that he had the Answer vouchsafed unto him.

Presently Dr. Leonard rose from his seat at the bedside.

“You never told me,” he said, “how it happened.”

“No,” answered Crozier, looking at his companion in a curious, searching way. “No; I will tell you.”

He paused, and withdrawing his hands from his pockets he rubbed them slowly together, palm to palm. This man never attempted to beat about the bush.

“I did not tell you before,” he continued, slowly and deliberately, “because it is a long story, and . . . because . . . because I funk'd it.”

Wilson Leonard had not been a doctor for some years without acquiring a few small professional mannerisms and habits. He was unscrewing the ivory end of his stethoscope with a certain briskness which I am afraid many of us know too well. We all have a professional

way of handling the tools which our craft requires. Watch the doctor with his instruments—consider the waiter with his plates. He looked up sharply as he continued unscrewing. The action was that with which he heard of an undesirable symptom.

“Yes,” he said. “Go on, please.”

“Myra’s,” said Crozier simply, “has been burnt down. St. Antony’s fellows have prophesied it for years, and now it has come. Tom was unfortunately there. He and Syra were in the inner bar, and they were driven up-stairs by the flames. There was a delay in the arrival of the escape, and the only way out of it was to swing down by a rope which the crowd held taut, away from the house. He attempted to save Syra, and would have done so, but he fell back insensible.”

Wilson Leonard stood quite still. He was carefully buttoning his top-coat in a peculiar mechanical way. He pulled it down in front, and tapped his chest where there were wrinkles in the cloth.

“And Syra?” he asked in a toneless whisper.

For some time there was silence in the room. Crozier moved uneasily, and turned his back upon his companion.

"She fell," he said at length.

Dr. Leonard moved, and Crozier, turning, saw him draw the sheet over Tom Valliant's face.

"Where have they . . . taken her to?" he then inquired.

"To St. Antony's."

Leonard stroked his colourless moustache thoughtfully.

"And that was why you were in such a desperate hurry to get me out of the place," he said softly.

The singer did not answer. There was nothing to say, and he wisely recognized the fact. His companion now crossed the room, and sat slowly down in a low chair. He looked up speculatively at Crozier.

"How quietly I am taking it, Sam," he said, "am I not? Very quietly."

At this moment they were interrupted by footsteps, clear and loud, in the solitude of Lime Court.

"There is Mrs. Valliant," exclaimed the singer, moving towards the door. But Leonard stopped him.

"I say, Sam!"

"Yes . . . ?"

"I would sooner," said the doctor, "have heard that news from you than from any man in the world."

Crozier nodded his head in vague acknowledgment, and passed out of the room, leaving Leonard alone with his own thoughts—alone with the calm, restful form beneath the sheet. He hurried away, with all a brave man's cowardice, from thanks; but he fully recognized the meaning of the simple phrase, which was at once a confession and a mark of life-long gratitude.





CHAPTER XIV.

“BE YE THEREFORE VERY COURAGEOUS.”

CROZIER'S note reached Elma as the last guest was lighting his cigar in Sir Thomas Firton's hall. Lady Firton had just dropped wearily into a low chair in the drawing-room when the servant brought in the letter upon a salver. He handed it to Elma, although the address was distinctly written; but he knew that Mrs. Valliant had left with the Barker family some time before, and the word “immediate,” written across the corner of the envelope, justified the action.

Notes do not usually arrive at midnight, but the rest of the house party were too well bred to show their astonishment. Only Lady Firton looked a little anxiously at Elma. It was

noticeable that her habitual expression, which was one of capable kindness, changed with marvellous rapidity to a look of keen anxiety. But many gay and laughing ladies have that way with them. Their smile is sincere enough, but there is no depth of joyousness in it.

"It is addressed to mother," murmured Elma to her hostess, who was seated quite close to her ; "but I will open it, because it is from Mr. Crozier. I am afraid something must have happened."

Lady Firton was still watching, with the quick contraction about her lips somewhat intensified. She said nothing. Elma had already torn open the envelope in a dexterous, fearless way, so there was nothing to be said. But Lady Firton noticed the fearlessness and the quick determination.

"The only thing she has inherited from her mother," she said to her husband later, "is nerve. She has her father's sweet, cheery nature and her mother's strong nerve."

Elma read the note, and rose quietly to hand it to Lady Firton.

"I must go at once," she said, in a low voice.

Somehow the other guests had dropped away, and they were alone at the end of the long room.

In a momont Lady Firton had taken in the meaning of Crozier's hasty words.

"I will go with you, dear," she said at once.

"No," answered the girl earnestly, "I would not think of such a thing. My own maid will be quite sufficient escort."

"But, my dear Elma, you cannot go to a man's chambers at this time of night with no one but a maid."

"Mr. Crozier's chambers," suggested Elma.

"Yes," replied Lady Firton, readily enough; "I know. Sam is different from other men, but still . . ."

At this moment Sir Thomas entered the room. He was smoking a very large cigar, and a pleasant smile came over his bronzed face when he saw his wife.

"Tom, come here," cried her ladyship. "What are we to do?"

He took the letter and read it slowly. Then he emitted a thin, spiral cloud of blue smoke.

"Sam Crozier," he said, with a sudden change of manner, from easy indifference to grave energy, "is not the man to lose his head and make a mountain out of a molehill. This letter means more than it says. I see it is addressed to your mother."

"Yes," said Elma, hastily; "but mother is sleeping at Mrs. Barker's. I must go at once to Tom."

Sir Thomas glanced at his wife. Their eyes met for a second.

"Yes, my dear child," he said then, "you must go at once. Shall I go with you, or would you rather have Parkyns the butler?"

Elma hesitated. She was afraid of appearing rude to this diplomat, who seemed to divine her thoughts almost before they were formed.

"I will tell you what we can do," said Sir Thomas, without waiting for her reply; "you go off with Parkyns in a hansom to Crozier's. I will go to Mrs. Barker's. If the house is shut up and I cannot see your mother, I will go down to the Temple myself, and bring you home here. It may not be so serious after all. Now run up and

put on a thick cloak. Parkyns will have a cab waiting by the time you come down-stairs."

The girl obeyed, and husband and wife were left alone in the empty ball-room. Sir Thomas removed the large cigar from his lips and looked into his capable little wife's face. The expression of anxiety denoted by a contraction round the eyes was still there.

"Is this an incident," he asked, "or a tragedy?"

Lady Firton was looking at the bare, smooth floor. Here and there a flower, a bow, or a piece of muslin had been kicked aside. It is better to turn out the gas and go to bed as soon as a ball-room is deserted; the sight of it is not cheerful.

"I am not sure," she answered, "I cannot tell at all. There is *some one*; I only hope it is not Tom Valliant."

Sir Thomas had Crozier's letter in his hand. He now read it again, thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said, "yes. It is to be hoped so, for I think the boy is dead. By the way, he was not here to-night."

"No ; he does not go to dances if he can help it."

Sir Thomas turned away to call the butler, who passed the door at this moment.

"You had better go down to the supper-room, old lady," he said to his wife. "They are all there, and will be wondering where we are."

The streets were empty, and the cabman divined that pace would pay. When Parkyns announced that they had arrived at their destination, Elma realized the fact with a sudden throb of fear. As they had come by the Embankment she had seen nothing of the fire, which was now almost under control.

Before there was time to ring the bell Crozier opened the door himself. }

"You !" he exclaimed, anxiously, when he had recognized Elma.

Then he looked over her shoulder, and saw that her companion was Sir Thomas Firton's butler.

"Good evening, Parkyns," he said, in a singularly calm voice. "Just wait here, will you ?"

There was a comfortable chair in the passage,

and the butler seated himself resignedly, while Crozier led the way up-stairs. Elma followed him closely. His peculiar hesitation of manner (as if for once in his life he was at a loss and did not know what to do next) puzzled her. In a mechanical way she noted the characteristics of the room, even to the little copper kettle in the fender, the pipes upon the mantelpiece, and the piano laden with music.

“Where is Tom?” she asked, looking round the room.

“In there,” he answered, indicating the door of the bedroom, across which the curtain was drawn.

She moved towards it, but he was before her, and stood squarely, with his back to the curtain.

“You must not go in,” he said, gently. “Oh, Elma, why did you come?”

“I came,” she answered, “because mother had left; she is staying at Mrs. Barker’s. Sir Thomas has gone to bring her. It was clearly my duty to come to Tom.”

She made a step forward, as if expecting him

to move aside, but he remained motionless. Then she looked up into his face. Suddenly her soft, childlike eyes contracted with a look of horror.

"He is dead!" she whispered. "I can see it in your face."

In her excitement she laid her hand upon his arm. The sleeve was wet, and looking up she noticed a dull black mark across the front of his shirt, where a dripping rope had dragged. He took her hand and led her away from the door towards a chair.

"Yes," he said, slowly; "he is dead, and that is why I do not want you to go in. There is nothing to be gained by it. He himself would rather that you did not go, I am sure."

She was hardly listening. Her cloak had fallen from her shoulders, and she stood before him in all her sweet unconscious beauty. Her soft white dress was a little crushed, the flowers at her breast were brown and withered, and she was very pale and weary. But there was a look of keen womanly scrutiny in her eyes while she looked up at the strong calm man.

“What has happened?” she asked, quickly. “Your clothes are wet, and you are burnt. Your hair and even your eyelashes are singed.”

He passed his hand across his face. His crisp hair, his eyelashes, and even his moustache were tipped with white, which had a most peculiar effect, almost giving him the appearance of an elderly man.

“There has been a fire,” he replied. “Myra’s is burnt down. As I was coming away from Lady Firton’s I saw the glare, and knew that it must be somewhere in the Strand. It began in the bar, and Tom, who was in the inner room, was driven up-stairs. He tried to save . . . Syra . . . and would have done so, but he suddenly fainted. I was not there, but I was told of it. I got there a few minutes later with the escape, and—we—managed to get him out.”

“And Syra?” inquired Elma.

“She fell from the window when he fainted.”

“Killed?” whispered the girl.

“Yes. It was the second-storey window. I brought Tom here; at least I sent him under the care of a policeman, while I went round

by St. Antony's to bring Dr. Leonard. He never recovered consciousness."

Elma was seated in a low chair. She leant forward and stared at the dying fire.

"How sad—how very, very sad!" she murmured.

Crozier suddenly raised his head and turned towards her. There was a puzzled expression on his face, like that of a man who hears a sound for which he cannot account. There were tears in her eyes, and suddenly she began to weep gently and quietly. The dainty little lace handkerchief which she held to her face was never woven for tears.

He stood with one foot on the fender and his right arm resting on the mantelpiece, waiting with that purposeful calmness which was characteristic of the man. Presently she ceased sobbing, and sat motionless, with the tears still glistening on her lashes. Then he turned, and his deep-set eyes rested for a moment on her face and form.

"You are utterly exhausted," he said. He approached her, and stood for some moments

near her chair; indeed his hand was resting upon the back of it, looking down at her. There was a wonderful sense of comfort and helpfulness in this man's silent sympathy which warmed Elma's heart. Then he turned away and opened the small sideboard. With the quick noiseless movement of the hands which never quite leaves a sailor, he poured out a glass of wine and brought it to her.

"Thank you," she said, and obediently drank it.

At this moment there came the sound of some one moving in the bedroom, and Elma started.

"Dr. Leonard is in there," Crozier hastened to explain, as he went towards the door. He drew aside the curtain, and Dr. Leonard came into the room, closing the bedroom door behind him.

"This is Dr. Leonard—Miss Valliant," said Crozier.

Wilson Leonard went forward and took her hand. His eyes were very sympathetic, and his grave, melancholy face was singularly pale.

“I am glad to have seen you, Miss Valliant,” he said. “Tom and I were great friends, and I knew that his heart was very weak. . . . I knew that this must come, sooner or later. He has been a condemned man for years. I never told him, but I think he knew it. I am almost sure he knew it. Some people may think that I did wrong in not telling him, but the knowledge of it would not have made any difference. If doctors told all they know the world would be a more miserable place than it is. If your father and mother wish to see me, I shall be happy to give them all the information in my power.”

He held out his hand again and nodded to Crozier as he turned to leave the room. Before he reached the door he staggered to one side, and only saved himself from falling by clutching the sideboard. In a moment Crozier was at his side.

“Leave me alone, old fellow,” said Wilson Leonard, huskily. “I am all right. It was only a little giddiness, which will pass off when I get outside.”

He pushed Crozier's arm aside almost roughly, and passed out of the room. They heard him close the door, and immediately afterwards his footsteps rang out firmly and clearly on the pavement of Lime Court.

"He has had bad news to-night," said Crozier, when the sound had died away.

With womanly intuition Elma connected Wilson Leonard's bad news with the fire at Myra's.

"Tom once told me," she said, gently, "about Syra. Was it Dr. Leonard?"

"Yes," answered the singer; "it was Dr. Leonard."

They were both silent for some time. Perhaps they were thinking how promptly Wilson Leonard had come to his friend's side; how entirely he had set aside his own weariness and want of rest; how the man had given place to the doctor.

"I think," said Elma at length, in little more than a whisper, "that Tom knew. It would explain many things which I did not understand before."

Crozier recalled the conversation he had had

with Tom Valliant not so very long before, about the girl seated there within a few yards of the man who had loved her.

"Yes," he answered; "it would explain many things."

"That is why he would not take up any work seriously," continued the girl; "why he was so utterly indifferent about the future." . . . She stopped, and looked up towards her companion with a wistful smile. "That is why," she added, "he always talks of the phantom future—used to talk, I mean—oh, I cannot realize that he is dead at all!"

She glanced towards the bedroom door, as if half expecting Tom Valliant to draw aside the curtain and greet them with his sweet quick smile, and some merry suggestion. Death seemed so far from him in whom a bright vitality was never wanting. It was indeed hard to realize that the mobile and dancing eyes were closed for ever.

"If he did know it," said Crozier, "he was very plucky about it."

"Yes; he concealed his knowledge very

bravely. Do you remember, Sam, once long ago I told you that I thought his merriment was not quite sincere?"

"Yes, Elma; I remember."

It was a sort of understood thing that they should address each other by Christian names, for they had been children together; but of late the familiar habit had fallen into disuse, and in avoiding the formal Mr. or Miss they had learnt to do without the mention of names at all.

"He must have known then," murmured the girl, thoughtfully.

He did not answer her, and they relapsed into silence. Both were recalling a thousand incidents which rose before their mental vision, now that it was cleared by knowledge, in glaring evidence of the fact that Tom Valliant knew, and had known for years, that he was a doomed man. Such knowledge is one of the saddest things that human life contains, which, God knows, is saying a good deal, and science has assuredly done us doubtful service in this matter.

Elma's great calmness puzzled Crozier. He

had always taken it for granted that she loved the man who lay dead in the other room, but the knowledge of his sad and sudden death had been received by her in a manner indicative of nothing more than cousinly affection. He had, in a desultory way, concluded that she was waiting for Tom Valliant to declare his love, and now he knew why his friend had kept silence on this point. This knowledge was but an increase of sorrow, for it made Tom Valliant's fight against his fate a braver and truer battle. Such, in truth, it had been, for he had suspected that Elma's love was within his reach had he stretched out his hand. But he was withheld—withheld by the knowledge that in manly honour and fairness he had no right to speak of love to any woman; that the future was indeed a phantom. 'Tis the brightest light that flickers first. Tom's life had barely passed a third of the allotted span of years, but he left two marks upon the broad sands of time. One, the book of poems illustrated exquisitely and poetically, as the aged singer himself would have wished them illustrated; and the other a memory that lived for

many years at St. Antony's and at Goldheath—the memory of one who had been “very courageous,” as we are bidden to be. Some there were who detected a certain inconsistency, a glaring contrast between the drawings and the man whose work they were. In them there was something more than mere dexterity of pencil—something higher than an intuitive knowledge of light and shade—something deeper than a graceful delicacy of touch. There was a great thoughtfulness, and to it was added a subtle poetic conception. These qualities formed no part of the individuality which the artist choose to present to the world as Tom Valliant. Assuredly there was an inconsistency, and, in coming to meditate over it, there were one or two persons who realized that it lay in the fact that the almost reckless cheerfulness with which Tom Valliant's memory was associated was nothing more than a part of his scheme of life. It was a mask—a merry smiling mask—behind which to conceal the saddest of all the sad tales of which the first chapters were opening in St. Antony's students' hall.

"I wonder," meditated Crozier, following out his own thoughts with regard to Elma, "I wonder if I have been on the wrong tack for years. I wonder if I have made a great mistake."

Before the silence was again broken there was a sound of footsteps in the passage, and shortly afterwards a light tread upon the stairs. The door was opened quietly, and Sir Thomas Firton entered. He glanced at both occupants of the room in a quick, comprehensive way, and then he turned to Crozier. He raised his eyebrows interrogatively, and at the same time his lips framed the monosyllable—

"Dead?"

The singer nodded his head.

Then Sir Thomas went to Elma's side. He stooped over her very tenderly. If Crozier had made a mistake, he was not alone in his error.

"I could not bring your mother, dear," said Sir Thomas. "The house was shut up. Come home with me now; you can do nothing more."

She rose and took the cloak which the singer

laid gently upon her shoulders. There are some women who seem destined never to realize the pathos of life. It is not that they are devoid of feeling or sympathy, but in their sunny natures there is a fund of innocence and sweetness which never turns to sorrow or disappointment. They cannot believe in the evil of human nature; they never quite comprehend that life is real and earnest. Of these was Elma Valliant. To such fair optimists as this, men and women unconsciously make the best of things, seeking to detract from sorrow, surrounding them with the elements of human happiness. Thus it happened that Sir Thomas Firton and Samuel Crozier played into each other's hands—as men sometimes do—instinctively. Although Death was within a few yards of them, although the singer had looked upon it in all its grim reality a few minutes before, they avoided, by tacit consent, adding to its horror by lowered voice or awestruck manner.

It may be that Elma divined their intention, for who can read the thoughts that pass behind bewilderingly, almost aggravatingly, innocent

eyes, such as hers? Be that as it may, she said to Sir Thomas, softly and gratefully. "It is very good of you to take so much trouble. You are both very kind to me."

Her eyes were still a little red from recent tears, and as Sir Thomas [had said, she was utterly worn out between pleasure and pain. Crozier accompanied them down-stairs, and held open the door. Parkyns went on in front to call the cab. Sir Thomas walked gravely down the worn stone steps, and Elma followed him. Then suddenly she turned back, and running up again stood beside Crozier in the doorway.

"Are you quite sure," she asked in a whisper, "that you are not burnt or hurt in any way?"

"Quite sure," he replied, looking down at her with his slow smile.

She left him with a little nod—left him standing upon the top step, but he was quite grave now, the smile had vanished from his face. While he still stood there, the voice of Big Ben came echoing over the roofs; it was two o'clock. In less than two hours it would be daylight.

The singer turned and mounted the stairs slowly. Standing on the hearthrug before the glowing cinders, he leisurely passed his hands over his arms and shoulders. His clothes were almost dry now, and he had a nautical disregard for clean water. Nevertheless he reflected indefinitely, that the fireman upon the opposite roof need not have directed his hose towards the burning window just as he reached it.

He glanced towards the closed door of the bedroom, then he boldly crossed the room, and drawing aside the curtain he opened the door and crossed its threshold. Presently he returned, having exchanged his dress-coat for a short jacket. Then he settled himself in his deep arm-chair with the evident intention of sleeping there. But he was restless, and slumber failed to answer his call. He moved impatiently once or twice, and finally sat forward with his elbows upon his knees.

“I wonder,” he said, murmuring to himself, “whether I have been making a huge mistake all along.”



CHAPTER XV.

GOLDHEATH AGAIN.

CROZIER was not an impulsive man, but at times it pleased him to imagine himself to be such. His habit was to make up his mind slowly and very surely; and once made up it was as the laws of the Medes and Persians. His mistakes—for we all have them to look back to, I think—came rather from placing both sides of a question upon too equal a footing, than from a rash adoption of the course that for a moment appeared more expedient.

When, therefore, he stood one fair and sunny May morning at his window, and—while murmuring a song very sweetly—attempted to deceive himself into the belief that he was in an undecided frame of mind, the result was not

entirely satisfactory. His mind had been made up for weeks, almost stretching into months. The day had come for which he had been patiently waiting—that was all—a fair spring morning, when men's hearts are bold and women's soft. Moreover, he felt energetic, and there ran in his veins that subtle fire which imbues confidence and commands success. He felt that whatever he attempted to-day would be satisfactory

“I think I will go to Goldheath,” he said, interrupting his murmurous song. “I think I will go to Goldheath to-day!”

The deception was glaringly obvious. There was no thinking in the matter. He knew that there was half an hour yet before he need start, and he therefore stood lazily smoking, absently gazing down into the court where the shadow of the brave old lime-tree lay in fantastic patterns upon the pavement. The leaves were out and fully formed, but were yet delicate in their texture and thin and bright in spring-like hues, so that the sun glancing over the tiled roofs threw golden gleams among the branches and

soft hazy yellow shades. The ubiquitous London smut had not as yet taken up his lodging to any great extent upon leaf and stalk (though the seasoned wood was woefully black), so that the toilers of Lime Court and idlers of the same could glance out of their dirty windows and learn most unmistakably that spring was now established in the land. The legal sparrow knew this also, and held May meetings on the smutty branches from early morning until sunset. He did not sleep beneath the leafy roof because his town-bred feet were unaccustomed to a slumberous grip of round things; preferred something flat, with the warm corner of a chimney to lean against and be thankful for, about three o'clock ante-meridian. But he came down from the roofs and called his friends, and set up a restless chattering and a hopping from twig to twig, while all the neighbourhood's cats prowled around with murderous thought intent. For even spring (in addition to the battle that hovers round love) breathes murder and sudden death.

The singer looked down upon these signs of

joyous life, and listened vaguely to the sparrows' voice. With his hands thrust deeply into his pockets he stood upright, and while smoking the everlasting wooden pipe, thought gently over the possibilities of life, taken from the point of view of a strong man of thirty years. Of late he had acquired this evil habit of allowing himself to reflect upon abstract things and possibilities. He was no longer nervously active, anxiously studious; and some people thought that he was singing better than ever, although he confessed to being too lazy to learn so many new songs as publishers might desire.

The yawl was purchased, and once or twice during the spring its owner had run down to Cowes to superintend her fitting-out in the Medina, but no plans were yet made for sailing her, no voyages proposed.

Professionally the singer was in a better position than before. He had always been particular in the choice of his engagements, and his reputation now gained by this. One or two important concerts, patronized and attended by Royalty, had served to consolidate

his name, and now he had the pick of the musical world. With his old heedlessness he accepted or refused engagements as the spirit moved him, quite regardless of personal influence; and with his former generosity he offered his services in unexpected quarters when it was a question of pure charity.

Men spoke of "old Sam" with the same familiar affection as of yore, and it was soon almost forgotten that he was a rich man; that he did not belong at all to the improvident world of artists, journalists, young novelists, and old play-writers, who made merry over misfortune and their wasted lives in the busy circle which is the inner hub of London life; where night and day are as one; where mind and body are never quite at rest; and within whose charmed ring more genius has assuredly lived and died than in all England beside.

Home-sick foreigners, hospital-sick students, and life-sick strugglers of all sorts dropped in casually at No. 5 Lime Court, as they had always done, and went away from the door later feeling glad that they done so. No

meal-time, no hour of night or day was sacred—one could always find Samuel Crozier, and he never appeared too much occupied to spare a few minutes to help by word or deed his fellow-men.

While he was still standing at the window, Wilson Leonard ran lightly up the stairs and entered the room.

“Spring at last,” he said, with a grave smile, as he held out his hand.

“Yes, the spring has come.”

The young doctor’s sympathetic glance sought the singer’s face, and searching there discovered that there was a second meaning in the simple acquiescence—a meaning intended for the speaker’s private edification. From the strong and gentle face (the true sailor face) Leonard turned his attention to the upright person, and detected there a difference in habiliment. Crozier was dressed in country clothes, and yet he pretended to himself that the idea of running away from London and its dusty life had only come to him after breakfast. The doctor moved a little, and looked out of the window thought-

fully. Suddenly a short rapid sigh broke from his lips, and he seemed quite unconscious of it. These little sighs were becoming dangerously habitual with him.

"This sort of weather makes one long to get away," he said, softly; "to get away from town and hospitals, sickness, accidents . . . and . . . everything."

"Yes . . ." answered the singer. It seemed as if he were going to add something more, but he stopped suddenly and continued smoking. He was pondering over that sharp sigh and the emotionless, sympathetic face—wondering over the wealth of meaning that lay sometimes in the little word "everything."

Professionally, and from a practical worldly point of view, Fate had interposed her steady hand for the infinite benefit of Wilson Leonard as a doctor and a gentleman. Poor Syra had been right when she boldly told him that she could only bring misery into his life, and he knew it, but from the knowledge gained no consolation. Had the world known the story of this kindly young doctor, they would have

bid him congratulate himself that a terrible mistake had been averted—that it lay in a nameless grave in one of the vast fields where sleep the London dead, crowded and hustled even in their rest. But the world knew nothing of the story. It was hidden from every living soul with the exception of the broad-shouldered man who stood smoking in his simple silence, pondering over that little word “everything,” and realizing slowly that there was something which Dr. Leonard could never leave behind, and never get away from.

“I am beginning to think,” said the young doctor, “that I cannot stand this much longer. No doubt it is the effect of the spring weather. But Saint Antony’s is too busy with misery—utter and hopeless misery. I have done my share; I think I have waded deeply enough, Sam, into the mire of human troubles. It cannot be good for a fellow to live too long in one groove, especially when that groove is full of suffering.”

“You want a thorough change, Leonard,” said Crozier, presently. “You have seen too

much of the shady side of existence all at once, and it has done you harm. You will be beginning to think that all the world is like it, which is a mistake."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"I will tell you what you must do," continued the singer. "Come with me for a cruise; my yawl, the *Willow-wren*, is ready and waiting at Cowes. I want to get up a party . . . the Valliants . . . yourself, your sister if she will come, and a sailor-man I know of. He is never quite serious, and never cynical, a very rare combination, which makes a splendid companion. We will go for a month up into the Norwegian Fjords, where there is never a heavy sea, and fish and lounge. I think perhaps we all want a change."

"It sounds very jolly," said the doctor, with a wan smile.

"It will be very jolly. I will get the company together at once. In fact I rather thought of going down to Goldheath to-day—partly with a view of seeing if they would come. The old gentleman is an enthusiastic fisherman, and . . . Miss Valliant . . . paints."

“When do you think of starting?”

“About the middle of June,” replied the singer. “Midsummer is the best time for northern regions. Everything is so beautifully fresh and cool, which is exactly what we want—eh?”

“Yes, that is what we want.”

It is strange how men can go on living together, or near each other as friends for years, without ever exchanging a confidence. No reference to the past had ever been made by either Crozier or the doctor. Syra's name had never been mentioned, had never passed their lips since that night when Elma sat in dazed silence and watched the two men standing together at the door—Leonard pale and sick, Crozier quick and watchful. The little stagger, the numb clutching at the wall, had never been explained, and never would be now. A strained reference was occasionally made to Tom Valliant, sleeping peacefully in Goldheath churchyard, blind to all the shadows, deaf to the weary plash of rain and the dull foreboding roar of storms; but the subject was too near to other matters painful for both, and was soon dropped.

It was only by vague half-hidden words of sympathy that Crozier referred at times to the chapter in Leonard's life which was destined for deliberate obliteration in the face of the world, though its effect went through existence with him; and by quiet acquiescence Leonard acknowledged his friend's intention.

"Then," said the singer, in a business-like tone, "I may count upon you? I may hold you out as an attraction to hesitators?"

"Thanks," replied the other; "I should like to go very much."

His tone was cheery enough, but Crozier glanced at his face as he turned to seek his hat, and saw that Wilson Leonard was not telling the strict truth. Had he told this he would have said that he did not care a rap where he went and what he did, for a great and weary indifference had come to him.

"I must be going now," said Crozier. "There is just time to catch the train. Will you walk along with me?"

The doctor looked round for the inevitable Gladstone bag, but saw it not.

“You are taking no luggage?” he said.

“No. I am not going to stay—have to sing at Kensington to-night.”

Conversation became broken and desultory as they walked together along the Strand. The human tide was flowing eastward, and was therefore against them, which necessitated continual separation. At the corner of Waterloo Bridge they parted, and Leonard went back to St. Antony's, while Crozier crossed the river.

There was absolutely no incident to mark the railway journey, and yet it was one that the singer remembered to the end of his life. The train was almost empty, and he had the choice of many compartments. Once beyond the suburbs he lowered the window, and soon afterwards his newspaper began to lose interest. The line was very familiar to him; he had travelled on it years ago with his first brass buttons proudly gleaming on his breast, and his last tears struggling to flow. Between those two railway journeys lay a whole history.

Presently the train ran into the sandy pine country. There had been rain the night before,

and all the atmosphere was fragrant with the strong energetic smell of oozing resin. Through the odorous forests the travellers sped, stopping here and there at quiet little roadside stations, until at last it was Crozier's turn to alight.

Mechanically he nodded to the station-master, who remembered his father, and held his own opinions about a parson's son taking to singing and play-acting, and the like. Sam Crozier had never acted a part in his life except his own, which had at times been difficult enough, but at Goldheath one stage was considered as bad as another.

As he walked along the gravelly platform he looked round him at the broad open country, and inhaled the fresh spring air. Never, he thought, had breath been so sweet—without even noticing that the station-master's wall-flowers were out, which no doubt accounted for it all.

In a few minutes he was striding across Goldheath by a narrow pathway shorter than the road. Goldheath it was indeed that morning, for furze and whin were blooming in golden luxuriance, and the yellow-clad undulations rolled

away into hazy distance unbroken save by a stunted pine or two and some straight larches clad in new and delicate green, of which the subtle aroma (like nothing else that I can think of but claret-cup) came in puffs.

Overhead the larks were singing blithely, while all around whin-chat, wren, and yellow-hammer added their voices to the great rejoicing. Away somewhere in the distance a hawk whistled his mellow call, and fancied himself a curlew.

Through this Samuel Crozier sped rapidly with firm long strides, and softly hummed his most melancholy song because the world was so fair, the morning so bright; because he felt that the day was his, that whatever he attempted he must accomplish, whatever he sought he was sure to find.

The short cut which he had chosen did not lead to the village of Goldheath, but direct to the Court, cutting diagonally the long path. There was a stile from the open heath into the orchard, which latter was but thinly wooded, and no great success in the primary matter of fruit,

and as he climbed this he heard the sound of wheels upon the soft gravel of the avenue.

He walked on beneath the blossoming trees towards the sound, and then suddenly, and in a most unaccountable manner, he stopped. Through the, as yet, untrimmed hedge he had caught sight of Squire Valliant's ancient mail-phaeton. The old gentleman was gallantly driving with squared elbows, and at his side sat his wife.

Years ago in a little affair of a naval brigade, Samuel Crozier had learnt most effectually the art of seeking covert. He merely stooped and turned down his trousers, in which he had taken a reef for greater convenience while crossing the sandy heath; but it happened that a very promising black-currant bush entirely concealed him from the view of any persons who might be in the avenue.

As the sound of the wheels diminished he rose again erect, and walked on with no outward sign of an evil conscience.

"She will either be in the walled garden or in the house, painting," he said gravely to himself. "Of course she may be out, or even

away from home, but . . . but I think she is here."

On nearing the house he ignored the formal bell at the side of the broad porch, and directed his steps across the turf towards the trellised door of the walled garden. There was no hesitation, no pause in his progress. He merely pushed the door open and walked straight in. Instantly a warmer breath of air met his face, and it was heavy with the odours of a hundred old-fashioned flowers. A few yards away from him was Elma. She did not hear him, for the soft sandy gravel made no sound beneath his feet, and she did not see him, because she was walking in the other direction with a book in her hand which she was reading.

Round the walled garden, which was itself a circle, ran a circular path of sandy gravel—a pleasant path to walk upon, for at parts it was shady, and there were sunny intervals such as are bearable and even grateful in most of our English summer days—which, if a wanderer may say so, are as near perfection as earthly climate reaches. Again, there was no break in the path,

no halt and turn, but a continuous round amid sweet-smelling flowers. Here Elma loved to walk with a book, amidst her odorous slaves, with the birds singing all around her.

Crozier stood beneath the shade of an old ilex, and watched her as she moved away from him. Clad in a simple cotton dress of a faint pale blue, her head was without other protection than her own soft dry hair drawn upward in sweet disorder. She walked with a slow and measured step, which was very peaceful, with that gentle sense of rest which nature alone can teach us, and that only if we have not lived too long in towns.

And so he stood in his silent repose, and waited for her to come round to him. Unconsciously he thus symbolized his own life. Had he not waited in that same fatalistic, unmurmuring way for her to come to him through all the years that lay between them? Had she not, in her turn, started on a path which apparently led in an opposite direction, following its winding guidance through sunshine and shadow, scarce glancing to either side with those

soft inscrutable eyes of hers, only to tread in the right way at last? There was no break in that circular path, and if we only knew it, there is a similar path beneath our feet marked out for us to follow, and yet we leave it deliberately, and crush the flowers that grow on either side. Elma loved the flowers too well to crush them, and she knew the path too well to leave it. Unconsciously and sweetly studious she came round to him.

Suddenly she became aware that there was some one near her, standing indeed hatless in the middle of the path before her. It was beneath the shade of a glorious old cedar, but a shaft of sunlight glanced through the dark boughs and gleamed upon the pages of her book, throwing back a soft glow upon her features. Thus it happened that although her face was in the light, her eyes being in the shadow were soft, and deep, and dark, when she raised them to his face.



CHAPTER XVI.

SAM EXPLAINS.

SHE was a little startled, and even after she had recognized him the expression did not vanish from her eyes ; indeed it became a trifle more discernible.

“ Ah ! ” she exclaimed with pleased surprise, “ is it you ? ”

She held out her cool hand, which he took with his peculiar little bow, very courteous and somewhat out of date.

“ Yes,” he replied, “ it is I. I hope I don’t come *mal-a-propos* ; but this lovely day took me by surprise. I was not prepared to resist the temptation, and so succumbed.”

“ Of course not,” she said, politely ; “ we are always very glad to see you.” There was a little pause, and then she added in a more familiar and less conventional tone, “ I think we have all tried to make you understand that you

can never come *mal-apropos*, but you refuse to take us at our word."

He smiled vaguely, and looked round the garden in a singularly interested way.

"Mother and papa have just gone out," she added, seeing that he was inclined to silence, which for some reason was irksome to her just then.

"Yes," he said, honestly, "I saw them from the orchard."

"But they did not see you?"

"No . . . no ; they did not see me."

They were slowly walking side by side round the walled garden, and again there was a little pause, well filled however by a thousand trilling voices.

"What were you reading?" he asked at length, almost abruptly.

"Oh !" she answered, in a relieved tone, as if at last a congenial topic had been found ; "an old history of the county, which I discovered behind some other books in the library. It has your father's name on the first page, by the way."

He took the book and looked at its pages studiously, without reading a single word printed there.

“I had just come across a most interesting statement. It appears that Valliants have lived here for a long time, and that the Croziers lived two miles away, across the heath, in a house of which no sign is left.”

“And hated each other, I suppose?” he suggested, gravely.

“No; on the contrary.”

“Fell in love with each other?”

“Well, it does not mention that; but it says that harmony existed between the two families, and that a Valliant and a Crozier—I mean a Crozier and a Valliant—rode southward together to Rye, where they took ship to the Holy Land at the bidding of Peter the Hermit.”

“That is rather interesting,” said Crozier, meditatively; “I would give a good deal to see those two fellows now. Not in their knightly armour and Crusader cloaks, but in their every-day clothes—just as they may have walked together in this garden.”

“It is strange to think of,” said Elma, softly. “I never quite realized what it is to have ancestors; in fact I did not know we had any. It is very strange to think that those two men

may have walked round this very path with their armour clanking. It makes those old days more real to think that we had relations there. I wonder what they were like—the two crusaders ; whether they were devoted to each and very courteous in their knightly way, or merely familiar as men are now, so that one cannot tell whether they are friends or not.”

“I expect,” said Crozier, “that they were just the same as we are now. No doubt they laughed and talked, and deceived each other, or partially deceived each other, into all sorts of wrong beliefs, just as we do now ; and it is probable that those two men knew no more of each other’s real individuality than I know of that of the Pope of Rome.”

She laughed in a slightly strained way, and spoke at once as if to avoid a momentary silence.

“How unsatisfactory !” she exclaimed. “Then you are of opinion that human nature was as artificial then as now—that men did not confide in each other—did not trust each other ?”

“Human nature,” he answered, “has probably altered very little since the days of Noah. There were probably amateur theatricals in the Ark.”

Elma laughed suddenly.

“What *do* you mean?” she asked.

“Well,” he replied, gravely, “I don’t mean theatricals with a stage and a drop-scene and a prompter. I mean a much higher branch of the art, such as you and I and everybody perform every day in life.”

Then she knew it had come. There was no stopping it now, so she merely clutched her book rather more nervously, and walked on by his side. But the colour left her sweet young face, and her eyes were gleaming strangely.

“The stage,” he continued, “is this garden, that library—everywhere. The prompter, I suppose, is our own pride, and he is excellent. We are all excellent; our amateur acting is too good; we do it too well. With Pride for prompter and Reserve for stage-manager the comedy will be rather sad. If we would only show our feelings a little more and act with less skill, much sorrow would undoubtedly be averted. Most of our sorrows come from mistaken motives, and we deliberately continue to disguise our motives and hide our real feelings.”

“Yes,” she acquiesced, softly, “I am afraid we do.”

“But,” he continued, “there is in most parts a key-note, an explanation as it were of the whole deception—a text to the sermon—a reason for the complications.”

“Yes”—in a whisper.

For some moments they walked in silence, and from his greater height he looked down on her gently, noting the nervous grip of her supple fingers round the old leather-bound book, and the sweet, frightened wonder in her parted lips. She hardly seemed to breathe at all.

“Five years ago,” he said, slowly, “Tom told me that he loved you.”

She gave a little nod of acquiescence, as if it were no news for her.

“That,” he continued, “was the motive of my part. I have acted it so long now that it has almost become natural to me. It is almost harder to throw aside the mask than to continue wearing it. I know I have acted it well, because Tom never suspected me more than he suspected other men, for he was a little jealous. If you think over it, Elma, you will find that the

explanation of everything is in the secret Tom told me five years ago. It tied my hands, it held me back; in fact, it took the wind out of my sails, and I could do nothing but drift . . . drift idly, with no steerage way."

She walked quietly and steadily at his side, making no sign, saying no word. Her face was turned from him, and her eyes averted—those sweet innocent eyes that could not be brought to recognize harm in anything; but they were very soft, and the unshed tears were near. She carried the book in one hand now, and the other hung idly by her side. It was the hand nearest to him, and the fingers were moving gently towards him, and drawing back again.

"I loved you before Tom told me his secret," he said, simply. Presently he looked away from her with a peculiar smile which Syra had known—a smile that flitted across his face when he said anything against himself which had perhaps a certain vein of truth in it.

"Of course," he added, in a matter-of-fact way, "I am quite aware that I am not the sort of man for a girl to love, especially if she be bright and sweet and happy as you are. I am

a forbidding sort of fellow, I am afraid; too quiet and self-restrained, and dense, but . . . I love you . . . that is all I can say for myself. It may be that some day you can manage . . .”

He never finished the sentence, for he was interrupted by five small fingers creeping into the brown hand, which he carried half-closed, as sailors do. And so they walked on hand in hand, like two children. Elma's face was very rosy, but the tears were still hovering near. At last she raised her brave clear eyes to meet his. With a little smile she turned at length, and looked dreamily away over the high brick wall towards the snowy clouds clustering far off above the sea.

“It must have been a very hard part to act,” she said, softly and very sympathetically. “But,” she added, after a pause, with a sudden change of humour, “I knew it . . . I think I knew it all along. At any rate I . . . there never has been anybody else, I mean.”

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